

CANADIAN MODERNIST POETRY AND THE RISE OF PERSONAL RELIGIONS

by

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*To Jannaya,  
sublime champion of life*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: MAKE IT NEW THEOLOGY: E.J. PRATT AND WILLIAM JAMES .....	21
2.1 Introduction .....	21
2.2 “New Scaffolding”: James, Theological Modernism, and Pratt’s Early Poetry .....	28
2.3 “Hidden Springs”: The Mystical and Spiritualist Sources of Pratt’s Personal Religion .....	48
2.4 Beyond the Temple and the Cave: Messianic Mediations of the Personal and the Institutional .....	73
2.5 Conclusion .....	93
CHAPTER 3: MAKE IT (RE)NEW: CONVERSION AND THE PERSONAL IN THE WRITINGS OF MARGARET AVISON .....	97
3.1 Introduction .....	97
3.2 The Language of the New: Conversion Narratives and/as Discourse .....	104
3.3 “The Golden Stepping Stones to Faith”: Avison’s Conversion and/as Process .....	119
3.4 Personal Religion in the “Post-Christian” Era .....	127
3.5 Conclusion .....	143
CHAPTER 4: “THE IDEA OF GOD”: LOUIS DUDEK AS RELIGIOUS POET .....	148
4.1 Introduction .....	148
4.2 Discovering Atlantis: Dudek’s Religious Breakthrough .....	158
4.3 Beyond “Church Religion”: Churchgoing in the Age of Secularization and the Death of God .....	168

4.4 Art and/as Religion: The Strategy of Substitution .....	178
4.5 “Searchlights Scanning for a Definition of the Eternal”: Atlantis, Atomism, and Strategies of Adaptation .....	186
4.6 Conclusion .....	206
CHAPTER 5: THE FOURTH WAY: P.K. PAGE’S PLURALIST, PERENNIALIST SUFISM .....	213
5.1 Introduction .....	213
5.2 Iffy Sufism: Page’s Metaphysical Pluralism as “A Capacity for What-Iffing” .....	224
5.3 The Elephant in the Room: Experiential Pluralism and the Problem of “One-Eyed” Perspectives .....	238
5.4 Make It Noumenal: Sufi Mysticism and the Problem of Language .....	251
5.5 Conclusion .....	259
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .....	267
WORKS CITED .....	279

## ABSTRACT

In 1902, the American philosopher and psychologist William James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, an enormously influential text in which he famously states his preference for “personal” or non-doctrinal over “institutional” forms of religion. This dissertation considers how the gradual diffusion and evolution of this notion of personal religion served as a catalyst for subsequent discussions of religious experience and expression in twentieth-century Canadian poetry. I argue that James not only encapsulated the religious concerns of his own age, but that he also predicted—and in many instances directly inspired—the kinds of anti-doctrinal and anti-institutional religious sentiments that began to emerge in the postwar period. Accordingly, I examine the formation of unorthodox, syncretistic, and pluralistic varieties of religious expression in mid-century Canadian modernist poetry, challenging what has been referred to as the secularization thesis (that is, the contention that modernization inevitably results in the decline of religion). More specifically, I discuss the notion of personal religion as it manifests variously in the published and unpublished writings of four poets, E.J. Pratt, Margaret Avison, Louis Dudek, and P.K. Page, situating their work in relation to relevant religious or socio-cultural contexts—such as the ascent of theological modernism and the increasing relegation of religion to the private sphere in the first half of the century, or the proliferation of pluralistic rhetoric in the second.

After a brief introduction to the notion of personal religion, I offer a series of case studies, which, taken together, provide a new narrative of literary modernism in Canada—one which accounts for Pratt’s syncretistic merger of Christianity and spiritualism, Avison’s non-denominational, intimate Christianity, Dudek’s atomist philosophy and transcendental-realist utopianism, and Page’s esoteric, perennialist Sufism as related but distinct responses to the problems and possibilities of modern life. In the process, I repeatedly invite reconsiderations of critical narratives of literary modernism that exclude or otherwise fail to address its continued and diverse engagements with religion, its continued aesthetic development in the second half of the twentieth century, and its articulation outside of dominant Anglo-American frameworks.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Art serves to record and perpetuate the living religion of a race. The dead religion, or the dying religion, of any time is to be found [in] its accepted creeds and formulated doctrines and inflexible institute. The living religion of any time is [to] be found in the arts and customs and habits and daily usage of the people of that time.”  
(Carman, “The Business of Poetry at the Present Time”)

“Our universe is a different one from that of our grandfathers, nor can our religious beliefs be the same. The whole movement, indeed, is a movement away from an erroneous but comfortable stability, towards a more truthful and sincere but certainly less comfortable state of flux. Ideas are changing, and therefore manners and morals are changing. It is not surprising, then, to find that the arts, which are an intensification of life and thought, are likewise in a state of flux.”  
(Smith, “Contemporary Poetry” 31)

At almost the exact mid-point of the twentieth century, the Canadian literary critic John Sutherland—then editor of the modernist little magazine *Northern Review*—cast a backwards glance at Canadian poetry of the 1940s, reversing some of his earlier judgments concerning the religious dispositions of “the younger poets” (119). Of this new generation, he remarks:

They are acquiring a new idea—or a variation of an old idea. In the introduction to *Other Canadians* [1947], I wrote that the younger poets were resisting the dominant religious element of Canadian poetry, untying and throwing off their chains. That was only half-true then and it is not at all true now. I criticized Mr. [A.J.M.] Smith, the editor of the *Book of Canadian Poetry* [1943], for his religious emphasis, and I protested that his effort to force a religious interpretation on the new poets was not abiding by the rules and prophesied that it would prove futile. Well, I take it back. I still think Mr. Smith was forcing matters at that time, but the event has shown that he was substantially right. For the new poets have



come back, if not always to religion, at least to a soul-searching which has strong religious implications, and to an attitude of mind more in harmony with that of earlier Canadian poets. (“The Past Decade” 119-20)

This apology, which came around the time of Sutherland’s conversion to Catholicism in the early 1950s, gestures back to a number of Canadian modernism’s well-documented interpersonal and literary-critical conflicts. But it also re-affirms Sutherland’s sense that recent shifts in Canadian poetry were inextricably and profoundly linked to shifts in attitudes towards religion. Whereas in 1947 he had emphasized religion’s importance indirectly, by arguing that the kind of “art-religion hypothesis” epitomized in the epigraph from Bliss Carman, above, was the “first cause” of “the extraordinary narrowness of Canadian poetry” (55), he now framed this relationship—and the relationship between successive generations of poets—in much more positive terms. And yet Sutherland remained ambivalent about whether this new kind of quasi-religious verse was the expression of “a new idea,” or simply “a variation of an old idea”; the fundamentally modernist tension between the old and the new, between respect for tradition and unadulterated iconoclasm, filters into his articulation of the distinction between “religion” and “a soul-searching which has strong religious implications.”

In Carman’s phrasing, “dead religion”—presumably what Sutherland had meant when he referred to “that decayed faith, that shoddy and outworn morality, which blends in Canada with the colonial’s desire to preserve the status quo” (“Introduction” 55)—appeared to be giving way to new forms of “living religion.” However, it seems that these new forms of religious expression were “not always” clearly recognizable as such (Sutherland, “The Past Decade” 120). On the one hand, then, one might argue that

Sutherland's revised assessment vaguely anticipates some of the broad religious trends of privatization and anti-institutionalism that continue to radically transform the West, just as they did in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Sutherland's implied distinction between orthodox religion and unorthodox spirituality, like Carman's distinction between "dead" and "living" religion, can be traced not only to the pre-modernist past, but to specific forms of theological and intellectual discourse that influenced modernist culture both in Canada and on the international stage.

In the twentieth century, it is doubtful that anyone played a larger role in cementing such distinctions among intellectuals, artists, and the general public than William James (1842-1910), the renowned American philosopher and psychologist. Indeed, James's notion of "personal religion," from his massively influential *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), is predicated on the same anti-institutional, anti-doctrinal logic that underwrites Carman's rejection of "dead religion." *Varieties* as a whole not only encapsulated the intellectual and religious concerns of James's age, but it also predicted—and in many instances directly inspired—the kinds of prevailing anti-doctrinal and anti-institutional religious sentiments that continue to this day. But what did James have to do with Canadian modernist poetry? What, for that matter, did James have to do with any form of literary modernism?

The essays in David H. Evans's edited collection *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism* (2017) provide several answers to the latter question, as do

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1. As a 2015 survey of Canadians declares, "even as our affiliation with organized religion continues to decline we still believe—just in our own, often deeply personal, ways" (Boesveld and Rivait). Another more recent poll (also conducted by the Angus Reid Institute, but as part of the Faith in Canada 150 project) arrives at a similar conclusion: "Results of the online poll offer reason for organized religions to be

the essays featured in the 2017 double special issues of *William James Studies* (*New Directions in William James and Literary Studies* and *Further Directions in William James and Literary Studies*) edited by Todd Barosky and Justin Rogers-Cooper. So while James's influence in modernist circles has frequently been summed up with reference to stream-of-consciousness narration and the shining stars of the Anglo-American modernist firmament, a more accurate picture of James's literary legacy is now emerging—and for good reason.<sup>2</sup> Evans, for one, opines that James was “closer perhaps than any other single figure to the center of the confluence of intellectual currents that defined the culture of modernism” (“Unstiffening” 2). And yet Canada is almost entirely absent from these recent publications.

Accordingly, my own study takes James scholarship in new directions altogether: it places modernist texts in conversation with aspects of *Varieties*—namely its notion of personal religions, and its related concerns about the difficulties of communicating one's personal religion—that have received little attention in literary circles.<sup>3</sup> But this study also crosses borders, illustrating how James's book caused shockwaves in Canada, at

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concerned. ‘The word “religion” itself has become a little bit of a four-letter word,’ Reid noted” (Hamilton).

2. Regarding stream of consciousness, one thinks immediately of James's former student, Gertrude Stein, as well as James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner. Yet studies such as Frank Lentricchia's “On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism, 1890-1913: The Example of William James,” Patricia Rae's *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens*, and Evans's *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*, make clear James's literary-critical significance in other respects, and to other writers of the period.

3. There are multiple exceptions worth noting here, including Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Erik Tonning's *Modernism and Christianity*, and Jamie Callison's ““Not for Me the Ultimate Vision”: T.S. Eliot's Ariel Poems and Religious Experience.” Even in Tonning and Callison, however, the focus is predominantly on James's views regarding mysticism or on contemporary debates about “religious experience,” rather than on the notion of personal religions or on the tension between personal and institutional religion.

what might still be considered the margins of a New Modernist Studies whose theoretical expansion in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” (Mao and Walkowitz 737) has not prevented critics from continuing to privilege certain Anglo-American figures and narratives in practice. Many Canadian modernists—who, in turn, inspired subsequent generations of writers in Canada and around the world—were influenced by *Varieties* long after it was first published: E.J. Pratt explicitly acknowledged James’s impact on his poetry in a private letter to Sutherland; Anne Wilkinson’s journal records her run-in with *Varieties* in the summer of 1950 (74); P.K. Page read James alongside Carl Jung, George Gurdjieff, and Idries Shah in the early 1960s; Louis Dudek read *Varieties* sometime in the early 1960s, while penning his modernist long poem *Atlantis*; and Margaret Avison tells of how her 1963 conversion to Christianity was preceded by her encounter with *Varieties*, which “got her going back to church” (Avison, “Margaret Avison” 3). Even Northrop Frye, Canada’s most revered literary critic, owned *Varieties* (R. Denham 328) and engaged with James’s ideas in texts such as “Substance and Evidence,” *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion*, and *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*. Still, it is worth stating that this study is concerned less with the rigorous demonstration of such lines of direct influence than with the gradual diffusion and evolution of the notion of personal religion as a catalyst for ongoing discussions of religious experience and expression.

While most readers of *Varieties* are familiar with James’s unequivocally stated preference for “personal” over “institutional” forms of religion, the apparent antagonism between the private and the public in this immensely popular text is all too often re-circulated as a kind of précis of the entire book—and understandably so: in order to limit

the scope of his study, he announces early on that he would like “to ignore the institutional branch entirely, . . . to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple” (32). Simply put, James’s “personal religion” emphasizes immediate religious experience and intuition over rational and doctrinal formulation; it attempts to eschew the trappings of institutional religion, so that “the ecclesiastical organization, with its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place” (29). But to distill James’s notion of personal religion down to an anti-institutional, solipsistic essence is to risk misunderstanding the seldom-discussed social implications of his philosophy of religion. Even the words “as far as I can” in the passage above foreshadow both James’s awareness of the arbitrariness of his separation of “the religious field” into the equally arbitrary categories of the personal and the institutional, and his inevitable failure to confine himself “to personal religion pure and simple” (32). The term “personal religion” is, after all, an oxymoronic one: its two halves are in constant tension.<sup>4</sup> As Ulf Zackariasson posits in a recent essay on the public dimensions of belief—as discussed by notable James scholars such as Richard Rorty—“the private/public-distinction seems much more porous than Rorty seems to think” (32). In the pages that follow, I echo Zackariasson’s call for renewed critical consideration of this distinction; unlike Zackariasson, whose essay focuses almost exclusively on James’s *The Will to Believe* (1896), I am interested primarily in *Varieties*. More specifically, I am interested in examining how the tension between personal and institutional religion is operative in modernist texts, and how modernists familiar with James’s writings might

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4. To be fair to James, what I have termed his “failure” to define personal religion satisfactorily is mitigated both by his insistence on the provisional nature of his definitions throughout *Varieties*, and by the sociologist Milton Yinger’s observation that

have nuanced or extended his notion of personal religions in relation to his overarching philosophy of religion or his pragmatic philosophy.

Before *Varieties*, however, personal religion had a life of its own in Christian treatises as well as in the psychology of religion, a field which James is generally considered to have founded. In countless texts spanning multiple genres and fields, the history of what later became known as personal religion can be traced back through the Protestant Reformation and through even earlier sources. Substituting “spirituality” for “personal religion,” Craig Martin contends that “James is only one person in a long line of thinking about religion that utilizes an inward/outward dichotomy, opposing inward ‘spirituality’ to ‘institutional religion’” (178-79), and he goes on to suggest that this dichotomy lives on in “today’s ‘I’m spiritual, but not religious’ (SBNR) movement” (179). In even greater detail, Charles Taylor identifies prototypical examples of personal religion in the seventeenth-century mysticism of French Jesuits (*Varieties of Religion* 16); in the eighteenth-century teachings of John Wesley, which led to the formation of Methodist and other revivalist churches that stress the significance of one’s personal relationship with God (18); and in the nineteenth-century writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher and other liberal Protestants whose emphasis on religious feeling and subjectivity correlated with Romantic movements in the arts, which in many cases developed as part of a counter-reaction to Enlightenment rationalism (100). By the end of the nineteenth century, too, lingering Romanticisms and liberal Christianities alike helped effect the so-called experiential turn in which James, Henri Bergson, and other dominant *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals were active participants. What is more, prior to the publication

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“Any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author” (qtd. in Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 6).

of *Varieties*, the term “personal religion” had already been deployed in texts such as John Newton’s *The Pleasures of Personal Religion* (1839), Edward Meyrick Goulburn’s *Thoughts on Personal Religion* (1871), and—likely most relevant for James—George Albert Coe’s “A Study in the Dynamics of Personal Religion” (1899), which had been published in the newly founded *Psychological Review*. James was clearly familiar with Coe, since *Varieties* discusses Coe’s *The Spiritual Life* (240-41).

In the mid-twentieth century, personal religion also took on new forms, both within the Christian church and without. In fact, the anti-doctrinal, anti-institutional zeitgeist James had captured so incisively in *Varieties* became increasingly evident from the 1940s on. In the Western world, the 1960s was a particularly transformative decade for religion: it witnessed the sudden prominence and public visibility of “death of God” theologians (such as Gabriel Vahanian, Thomas J.J. Altizer, and Richard L. Rubenstein) as well as Christian existentialists (such as Paul Tillich); the advent of what Robert Ellwood refers to as “the sixties spiritual awakening” (Hungerford 7); the increasing popularity of “faith in faith” as an alternative to “doctrinal or conversional religions” (Hungerford 3); and in Canada, specifically, the supposed end of Christendom in 1965 (Grant 216) and the concomitant proliferation of multicultural and religious pluralist sentiments around the time of the nation’s centennial celebration.

These kinds of dramatic mid-century shifts have caused scholars to postulate three overarching theories of religion: according to the first theory, which corresponds most obviously with James’s notion of personal religion, such changes occurred largely as a

result of individualization—that is, the relegation of religion to the private sphere.<sup>5</sup> In *Religion and Personal Autonomy: The Third Disestablishment in America* (1992), Phillip E. Hammond argues that a “third disestablishment” occurred in the 1960s and after as people began to define themselves less in relation to “primary groups” or collectives such as religious institutions. “If such people do get involved in a church,” Hammond writes, they may do so simply because they “regard it as an avenue to some privately chosen goal—for example, to commune with God, educate their children religiously, enjoy music, or get therapy” (2). This “individual-expressive” (2) approach to religion is also what Taylor means by “expressive individualism,” a phenomenon “which has been growing since the [Second World War]” and which “seems steadily to advance” (*Varieties of Religion* 88). Still, as the oxymoronic name of James’s “personal religion” tacitly reminds us, and as the literary critic Amy Hungerford explicitly asserts, the apparent split between institutional and personal religions in North America has resulted “not simply [in] the coexistence of doctrinal and nondoctrinal faith, but . . . the mutual dependence of one upon the other” (3).

The second theory, secularization theory, proposes that multiple factors—including individualization—have caused religion to decline as it becomes less powerful and less visible as a social force; according to this view, modernization inevitably poses a threat to institutional religion, and belief increasingly becomes “a private matter” (Stolz

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5. Countless studies have commented on processes of individualization in twentieth-century religion. Some noteworthy examples include Robert Wuthnow’s *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (1988) and *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (1998), Wade Clark Roof’s *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (1993), and Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007).



et al. 13).<sup>6</sup> However, as Thomas Luckmann argued in 1967, secularization theorists often failed to account for the ways in which the new and sometimes unorthodox forms of religion—both included in what I am referring to here under the broad label of “personal religions”—had taken the place of “institutionally specialized religion” (qtd. in Stolz et al. 15). As scholars of religion Paul Bramadat and David Seljak remarked in 2005, “Within the field of religious studies, and in some sectors of sociology, it has become almost a cliché to observe that there is very little evidence to support a classical version of the secularization hypothesis” (228). Consequently, a third group of scholars has interrogated the processes of individualization and secularization and sought to explain modern religious realities from an economic perspective.

According to these market theorists, believers are consumers in a religious marketplace, and churches or religious movements are suppliers catering to individual preferences and the demands of contemporary culture more broadly.<sup>7</sup> Unlike secularization theorists, though, many “market theorists vigorously deny that the modernization of Western societies has led to a decline in religion and religiosity” (Stolz et al. 18). In this view, pluralism, not unbelief, has been the net result. And yet, as Jörg Stolz et al. remark in their 2016 study *(Un)Believing in Modern Society*, “Empirically, it

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6. Notable proponents of the secularization theory (also commonly referred to as the secularization thesis or secularization hypothesis) include Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and, more recently, Bryan Wilson and Steve Bruce.

7. As Stolz et al. note, some of the most outspoken proponents of the market theory of religion include Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, and William Bainbridge (18-19). Similarly, a number of critics have characterized personal forms of religion in terms of the consumer-like tendency to pick and choose those aspects of religious traditions that they like best, and to reject the others. See, for example, Edward P. Echlin’s “Post Critical Contemplation and Do It Yourself Religion,” James Hudnut-Beumler’s *In Pursuit of the Almighty’s Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism* (2008), and Leigh Eric Schmidt’s *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*.

can also be shown that the mechanism postulated by market theory often plays no role, with increased pluralism, a freer market and less regulation often *not* leading to more religiosity” (19; emphasis in original). Like the theories of individualization and secularization, market theory seems unable to account fully for the complexity of the modern religious scene.

Nevertheless, by interpreting Canadian poetry with occasional reference to *Varieties* or to the ideas and traditions it inspired, I do not mean to imply that the Jamesian notion of personal religion should be received as an unblemished, all-encompassing theory of religion; it simply captures the individualistic tendencies that inform the interrelated narratives of individualization, secularization, and market theory. Regardless of the impact, direct or indirect, of James’s writings, the kind of approach to religion suggested by the historically and intellectually specific term “personal religion” was so common by the 1960s and 1970s, both in Canada and the United States, that it could hardly be disentangled from those subtending the countless alternative spiritualities and revamped religions of that era. In other words, the term’s immense cultural significance derives from its ability to tap into and generalize existing anti-institutional and unorthodox religious sentiments in such a way that it also served as a predictor of the specific forms that such sentiments would continue to engender.

Surveying the careers of four giants of Canadian poetry, E.J. Pratt, Margaret Avison, Louis Dudek, and P.K. Page, my study obviously engages the intersecting fields of religious and modernist studies through a distinctly Canadian lens. However, my circumscription of the topic in this manner is intended to highlight not the narrowness of the study at hand, but rather the reach of James and the extent of Canadian literature’s

involvement in transnational networks of intellectual and cultural exchange. To this end, I demonstrate how the many and varied manifestations of personal religion in these poets' writings can be understood in light of such contexts as their Anglo-American predecessors' iconoclastic and syncretistic responses to the supposedly outmoded institution of the church. I also show how their poetry reflects the kinds of contemporary changes in religion and religious discourse described above, or described by sociologists and scholars of Canadian religion such as Bramadat, Reginald Bibby, John Webster Grant, Phyllis D. Airhart, and Robert Choquette. As in the United States, for example, a "third disestablishment" took place in Canada in the decades following the Second World War and increasingly in the counter-cultural unrest of the 1960s, as Christianity gradually relinquished its claims as the "unquestioned common backdrop" or "worldview of any educated Canadian" (Bramadat 3).<sup>8</sup> That such seismic shifts would be registered in Canadian poetry should come as little surprise, whether or not one agrees with Carman's proclamation that "Art serves to record and perpetuate the living religion of a race."

In the second chapter, I examine the poetry of E.J. Pratt (1882-1964), the ordained Methodist minister and lecturer in psychology who would go on to become "Canada's most influential modern poet" (Djwa and Moyles xi). For at least two key reasons, Pratt's illustrious career, which spanned most of the first half of the twentieth century, serves as perhaps the most natural—and productive—entry point into discussions of James's notion of personal religion and its influence on Canadian literature: first, Pratt writes

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8. For varying accounts of the causes and consequences of a comparable "third disestablishment" in Canada, see, for example, John Webster Grant's *The Church in the Canadian Era* (240-42), Reginald Bibby's *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (3-6), Robert Choquette's *Canada's Religions: An Historical Introduction* (366-68), and Paul Bramadat's "Beyond Christian Canada: Religion and Ethnicity in a Multicultural Society" (3).

explicitly, at various points and in greater detail than most Canadian authors, about James's influence on his life and poetry; and second, while Pratt's own anti-institutional religious tendencies occasionally appear to support the so-called secularization thesis, the Christ-centric nature of his personal yet socially oriented religious beliefs intimates that modernity and secularity are in fact synonymous only if one adopts a rather limited notion of religion and what religion or religious expression might have looked like, for modernists such as Pratt, in the first half of the twentieth century. Although Pratt's poetry articulates its non-dogmatic and unorthodox affirmations outside of, and occasionally against, more recognizable institutional forms of religious expression, it is precisely in this respect that it most powerfully anticipates documented shifts in religion in the West. In other words, Pratt's poetry, which enacts James's distinction between personal and institutional religion, simultaneously adumbrates the complex, plural varieties of personal religious experience that collectively counter dominant narratives of modernity or of literary modernism in which secularity is narrowly defined with recourse only to institutionally informed metrics of religious beliefs and practices.

By presenting archival and poetic evidence of Pratt's spiritualist sympathies, I also challenge critical tendencies to read "Christian" modernist poetry in reference to reductive, static, and often ahistorical conceptions of that rather fluid, unwieldy complex of denominations and conflicting doctrinal traditions. Although Pratt's position within literary modernism is still the subject of debate, he was undoubtedly a modernist in the theological sense: his poetry questions "traditional" beliefs in its uneasy embrace of Darwinism and biblical criticism—both of which were associated with modernist theology in the early twentieth century. Tracing the evolution of Pratt's own thinking in

relation to that of theological modernists, one can see how his poetry also coincides with that of contemporary Anglo-American modernists in its eschatological imaging of the World Wars, as well as in its yoking together of the concept of God and the realities of fragmentation and human suffering. His poetry does not preclude the existence of God, but instead reclaims a particular kind of God while rejecting the “religion” of fascism and the supposed incompatibility of science and belief. Whether or not one concedes that Pratt’s poetry is modernist in a literary sense, his modernist and syncretistic religious views anticipated the widespread changes of the 1960s as well as Dudek’s, Page’s, and other later poets’ corresponding embrace of individualized rather than merely inherited religious frameworks.

My third chapter focuses on Margaret Avison (1918-2007), whose poetic account of her 1963 conversion to Christianity became the touchstone of her subsequent poetic and personal accomplishments. Engaging modernist as well as evangelical Christian discourses of the new, I interrogate existing literary-critical accounts which have consistently characterized Avison’s conversion as an unanticipated, punctiliar religious experience. I suggest that treating this moment as a neat temporal marker between two seemingly distinct halves of Avison’s life and poetry effectively suggests a lack of aesthetic or thematic continuity. Additionally, and somewhat ironically, Avison’s conversion to institutional religion has been articulated using the rhetoric of personal religion: hers is a “personal faith” (Gnarowski and Grandy)—and yet it is still a faith which struck some of her readers as out of place in a putatively secular or post-Christendom society. Ultimately, however, I point to the larger significance of Avison’s autobiographical writings by illustrating how the kind of rhetoric surrounding her

religious conversion—the very rhetoric she had encountered while reading *Varieties*—is intimately linked to modernist aesthetics and projects of self-definition; indeed, the discourse of renewal that informs her Christian theology is not far removed from modernism’s obsession with innovation and the new. On one hand, Avison’s conversion narratives follow what James and other scholars have referred to as an Augustinian model of “instantaneous conversion” (James, *Varieties* 227);<sup>9</sup> on the other, Avison also goes to some lengths, in autobiographical writings and interviews alike, to describe how her dramatic conversion of 1963 was bracketed by a series of gradual transformations. As I elucidate, this latter understanding of conversion is more congruous with her actual poetry, which deploys natural symbols of rebirth and regrowth to point to the necessity of conversion as an ongoing process.

In the second half of the dissertation, I turn my attention to two Canadian modernist poets whose personal religions developed outside of the kinds of Christian frameworks employed by Pratt and Avison. Both of these latter chapters foreground how many narratives of modernism fail to account for the different kinds of unorthodox, non-Christian religious thought that emerged—or continued to thrive and adapt—in the twentieth century. The fourth chapter features Louis Dudek (1918-2001), a prolific poet-critic, professor, editor, and publisher who moved beyond his childhood Catholicism in order to articulate a utopian vision of “Atlantis” in transcendental-realist terms. Although Dudek’s poetry earned him fewer accolades and less critical attention than that of the other figures in this study, it elicited praise from American literary luminaries such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Allen Ginsberg. Here, I invite new appraisals of Dudek’s poetry, and particularly his pivotal long poem *Atlantis*

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9. See, for example, Dorsey (34).

(1967), by considering his lifelong obsession with the idea of God. Indeed, Dudek was a deeply religious poet in his own way; the idea of God or ultimate reality, which is repeatedly represented in his writing by symbols such as Atlantis, would become an increasingly vital aspect of his writing. Nevertheless, while critics such as Frank Davey and Antonio Ruiz Sánchez have touched on the transcendental features of Dudek's poetry, none have discussed his religious views in a direct or sustained manner, and none have analyzed at length one of the key features of his religious vision: his writings on atomism, the ancient philosophical and scientific theory of indivisible particles. As we will see, Dudek began to draft *Atlantis* as a distinctly religious project co-extensive with his maturing poetics, and his idiosyncratic atomist philosophy of religion, which surfaces throughout his oeuvre, necessitates critical reconsiderations of both the nature and significance of religion in modernist and late-modernist poetry.

In the fifth and final body chapter, I address the Sufi writings of P.K. Page (1916-2010). In 2009, Kevin McNeilly referred to Page as “probably English Canada’s most important poet of the last fifty years” (423). My study is arguably bookended, then, by Canada’s major poets of the first and second halves of the twentieth century. Yet Page’s interest in a pluralistic, non-Islamic form of Sufism also establishes her as a fitting endpoint for this study, since her mystical Sufi beliefs correspond not only with certain esoteric and anti-institutional religious traditions of Pratt’s time, but also with the nascent 1960s and 1970s spiritual movements that would inform late-modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary literature. Like Dudek’s atomist philosophy of religion, Page’s Sufism is framed provisionally, as a kind of “quest” that psychologists C. Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis describe as an “open-ended, questioning approach” to

religion (166). And Page's open-ended Sufism inflects much of her poetry—beginning in the early 1960s, which is when she discovered the version of Sufism popularized by Idries Shah. Cutting her way through a swath of religious texts by Shah, James, G.I. Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, Jung, and others, she gleaned many of the mystical symbols and discourses that would irreversibly transform her life and poetry.

Curiously, at the inaugural World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, Sufism had not been represented in any of its forms (Hammer 143)—nor was it represented in Montreal more than seventy years later, when Expo 67 featured only four religious pavilions in a failed attempt to showcase Canada's projected diversity (Miedema 158). However, if in the 1920s Pratt's theologically modernist and spiritualist beliefs were still slightly unwelcome germinations of personal religion in Canada's highly conservative Christian milieu, by the 1960s Page's pluralist Sufism was merely one of its many flowerings. That is, Shah's Sufism was just one of many religious options available to Canadians at this time, and even if—like Islamic Sufism—it was still largely invisible on the national stage, Page worked to promote Shah's teachings publicly through her poetry and through her involvement both as a distributor of Shah's texts and as leader of a Sufi study group.

In addition to situating the work of Pratt, Avison, Dudek, and Page in their respective socio-cultural and intellectual contexts, the following chapters position this study at the crossroads of ongoing debates in sociology, religion, and literary studies. Consider, for example, the question of secularization. For several decades, literary critics seemed content to echo sociologists, positing the secularization thesis as one of the major narratives for understanding the content and trajectory of modernist literature: they



frequently used phrases such as “the neutralization of nature” (Richards 12) or variations of Max Weber’s “the disenchantment of the world” (155) in order to question the continued role of religion in, or in relation to, the writing of twentieth-century authors. After its heyday in the 1960s, however, the secularization thesis has been widely disputed. While literary critics lagged considerably behind their counterparts in sociology and religious studies in this respect, three monographs published in 2010—Pericles Lewis’s *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960*, and Norman Finkelstein’s *On Mount Vision: Forms of the Sacred in Contemporary American Poetry*—have compellingly identified a need for new and equally rigorous challenges in literary-critical accounts of twentieth-century poetry and prose alike.

While labels such as “the secular age”<sup>10</sup> usefully summarize certain present-day political and socio-religious realities, the extent to which the process of secularization shaped literary modernism in Canada from the 1940s through the 1960s (and well beyond) must be reconsidered in light of the many emergent as well as still-dominant forms of religious thought. This period was one of crucial significance in terms of the aesthetic and religious development of Avison, Dudek, and Page, and it deserves further attention from Canadian critics who have focused somewhat disproportionately on the 1940s. In many instances, Canadian modernist poetry is still defined only in reference to the 1920s and 1930s poets of the Montreal Group or to the 1940s activities of those associated with the Montreal-based little magazines *Preview* and *First Statement*, despite the fact that the post-1940s writings of poets such as Dudek and Page—two of the figures most clearly identified with what Dean Irvine calls “Canadian modernism’s mid-

twentieth-century canonicity”—actually participate in the “decentring” of such “restricted narratives” (“Introduction” 11).

One of the primary purposes of this study is to demonstrate how personal religions played a significant part in this decentring process. Fortunately, the recent religious turn in literary studies has paved the way for my own revisionary approach to the subject of Canadian modernist poetry, which seeks to embody Sarah Rivett’s claim that, “if the religious turn has taught us anything, it has taught us the need for new intellectual histories and genealogies that constitute our sense of what it means to be modern” (993). For this is precisely what I aim to provide: a new history of literary modernism in Canada that can account for the theological modernism and spiritualism of Pratt, the non-denominational and intimate Christianity of Avison, the atomism and utopianism of Dudek, and the Sufism of Page as related responses to the problems and possibilities of modern life. In the Canadian context, the need for such a narrative is suggested by anthologies such as Susan McCaslin’s *A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry* (1998), which is presented as “an exploration of the spiritual element in Canadian poetry” (13). McCaslin includes several modernist poets in the anthology, including Page and Miriam Waddington, and her introduction implicitly recalls James in its distinction between personal and institutional religion (14), or between “the discursive mind” and “rational intellect” (15). Nevertheless, William Closson James’s *Locations of the Sacred* (1998)—which thoughtfully explores the treatment of religious themes in Canadian fiction—is, to my knowledge, the only full-length comparative study of its kind in the Canadian context. Several monographs have examined the significance of religion to individual Canadian poets, but this dissertation is

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10. I am thinking here of Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.

the first protracted, comparative study to address these topics and questions in relation to Canadian modernist poetry, and among the first to do so in relation to Canadian poetry of any period.

In my conclusion, I gesture towards some of the ways that James's notion of personal religion and my own readings of Canadian modernist poetry productively complicate ongoing conversations about periodization, both within Canadian literary studies and in modernist studies more broadly. In addition to identifying some of the ways in which religion continues to be excluded from narratives of modernist and late-modernist literature, I also return to the concepts of syncretism and pluralism interweaved throughout this study in order to make visible some of the mechanisms according to which religion both continued to survive in late-twentieth-century poetry and was rendered increasingly resistant to classification. As McCaslin writes (alluding to Mark 2.22), "the creative mind resists and shatters 'old wine skins'" (14); and such is the case with each of the modernist poets featured here: they not only resist and shatter others' notions about what religion is or was, but, in the process, they also construct new forms of literary expression, giving their readers a glimpse of what religion—and religious poetry—can be moving forward.

## **CHAPTER 2: MAKE IT NEW THEOLOGY: E.J. PRATT AND WILLIAM JAMES**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Undoubtedly one of the landmark religious experiences in his life, E.J. Pratt's "conversion" was preceded by a group recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the twenty-third psalm, and the singing of several Christian hymns. However, this fateful event took place not in a church, nor under the gracious expanse of a revivalist tent, but at a séance hosted by Jenny O'Hara Pincock in St. Catharines, Ontario in 1928. That Pratt's unwavering belief in an afterlife seems to have derived from this moment—and not from his perfunctory conversion as a ten-year-old member of his father's Methodist flock—should come as no surprise to those familiar with David G. Pitt's two-volume biography of the renowned Canadian poet;<sup>11</sup> even so, that this episode is expunged from Angela T. McAuliffe's more recent critical study, *Between the Temple and the Cave: The Religious Dimensions of the Poetry of E.J. Pratt*, serves as a reminder of our continuing inability, as critics, to reconcile definitively the many aspects of Pratt's religious vision as they materialize in his poetry, essays, and correspondence. While this chapter will not attempt such a reconciliation, it will suggest that many of the shifts and apparently contradictory elements of Pratt's personal religion—including his interest in spiritualism—can be explained with reference to the writings of one man: William James.

From 1907 until 1917, Pratt immersed himself in philosophy, theology, and

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11. See Pitt, *Master* (8-10). For a detailed account of Pratt's formal conversion and its potential psychological and religious repercussions, see Pitt's *Truant* (30-31).

psychology at Victoria University in Toronto, and it was likely during these formative years that he first encountered James's philosophy. By this time, James was already a dominant figure in each of these three areas of intellectual inquiry, but especially in the nascent discipline of psychology, the subject in which Pratt was a lecturer at Victoria University from 1913 to 1920. Many years later, in a letter to John Sutherland, Pratt would explicitly acknowledge his poetry's indebtedness to James's philosophy: "It is only now in retrospect," he writes, "that I can feel the influence of two works which had to be thoroughly studied – The 'Principles of Psychology' by Wm James, and 'Immediate Experience' by [Wilhelm] Wundt. And I might add a third – James' 'Varieties of Religious Experience'" (Letter, 25 Feb. 1952). Although James's *Varieties* is listed here as if an afterthought, a subsequent letter to Sutherland of 11 August 1952 provides confirmation of that book's significant impact on Pratt's own thinking and poetry.

Indeed, the frequent echoes of James's philosophy in Pratt's oeuvre suggest that James's influence was more than retrospective, and in letters to Desmond Pacey dated 29 Oct. 1954 and 11 Nov. 1954 Pratt would cite both James and Wundt as two of the intellectuals "that most impressed [him] in undergraduate days" (Pratt, Letter to Pacey, 11 Nov. 1954). Nevertheless, while Pratt never voiced any disagreement with James, he openly admitted to Pacey that he "hated Wundtianism and its mechanisms" (12 Nov. 1956).<sup>12</sup> In light of such correspondence and particularly in light of Pratt's disavowals of Wundt's experimental psychology,<sup>13</sup> Sandra Djwa's assertion that in 1907 "psychology and ethics could still be conveniently studied in the works of one man, Wilhelm Wundt" (*Evolutionary* 13), is rather misleading, though her focus on Wundt at the expense of

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12. Cf. Pacey, "E.J. Pratt" (170-72).

13. See Pitt, *Truant* (146-48).

James is representative of a general tendency in Pratt studies.

Despite Pratt's self-proclaimed familiarity with and appreciation of James's writings, few critics have elucidated the connections between Pratt's poetry and texts such as *Varieties*, which established James as the de facto founder of the psychology of religion as a recognized field of study. Considering that both men wrote on psychological as well as religious topics, and that scholarship on Pratt is replete with commentaries on the psychological and religious import of his graduate theses, poetry, and literary writings, this paucity is all the more striking. In "E.J. Pratt: A Major Contemporary Poet" (1952), Sutherland first advanced the idea that James had influenced Pratt's poetry (37-40), and since then only a handful of critics—James Murray Clark, Pitt, R.D. MacDonald, and McAuliffe—have followed his lead. Of these, only Clark develops the James-Pratt connection at length. MacDonald mentions James merely in passing, and McAuliffe draws on James's "four marks" of mystical states (*Varieties* 380) in her explication of Pratt's *The Iron Door* (172) without even naming James or his book in the body of her text. Similarly, Pitt says that James was one of Pratt's "intellectual lodestars" (*Truant* 51), but he does little to substantiate this claim, intimating specific Jamesian influences on his subject's poetry and religious beliefs only to the extent that he quotes from Pratt's aforementioned 11 August 1952 letter to Sutherland (*Master* 171, 462). Clark's master's thesis, "E.J. Pratt and the Will to Believe: An Examination of His Unpublished *Clay* and His Poetry" (1971), is the first and only protracted study of its kind.<sup>14</sup> However, Clark references James's "Will to Believe" in order to deny, not nuance, the poet's theistic beliefs, maintaining that, after *The Iron Door*, Pratt turns away

from God while retaining a humanistic belief in the individual. But Clark does not seem to be aware of two crucial pieces of evidence: Pratt's séance experiences and his subsequent epistolary affirmations of faith. As we will see, these proofs of Pratt's faith—which also find expression in his poetry—directly contradict Clark's basic argument about Pratt's secular humanistic “will to believe.”

The task of delineating scholarship on religion or religious themes in Pratt's poetry is a difficult one, owing both to the bulk of this critical corpus and to the baffling divergence of opinion it represents. As reductive as such an exercise might be, the following sketch should provide a sense of the kinds of self-positioning and demystification requisite in any mediation of Pratt's work. At one end of the spectrum, critics such as Sutherland, A.J.M. Smith, Peter Hunt, Agnes Nyland, and McAuliffe have discussed Pratt's poetry in terms of orthodox Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Sutherland, for example,

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14. In a thesis published the previous year, John B.M. Thorpe seems to be drawing on James at several points, but he uses Jamesian terms such as “personal religion” (39) without ever crediting James.

15. Translated loosely from the Greek (*orthodoxia*), “orthodoxy” simply means “right belief.” Historically and theologically speaking, though, the question of what is “right”—that is, what is doctrinally correct—has elicited a variety of conflicting responses not only between one Christian denomination and the next but among individuals in any one denomination or church body. Furthermore, scholars such as Virginia Burrus have noted how “The discourse of orthodoxy . . . attempts to impose clarifying doctrinal distinctions and simplifying relations of power on diverse historical contexts typically characterized by enormous complexity and ambiguity—socially, culturally, and theologically” (8). In the following pages, I echo those of Pratt's critics who deploy the term “orthodoxy” in its broadest sense to refer to beliefs or actions that can be considered “right” within a particular religious tradition. Yet I am also aware that orthodoxy is socially and culturally constructed; at any given moment, what is right is defined both explicitly in official church doctrine but also implicitly by the constituents of such churches. Accordingly, for my purposes, “orthodoxy” is most useful as a marker of theological correctness in a relative rather than absolute, and general rather than doctrinally specific, sense: there is no single, static Christian orthodoxy, not least because “the Church” is not singular but fragmented and multiple (F. Brown 412). Still, it should be noted that whereas the Protestant and Catholic modernists that I discuss later in this chapter typically argued that

contends that, “as we go farther into the poems, we discover a vein of religious ideas of a quite orthodox colouring,” and that “Pratt is drawn back to a position ultimately very close to the traditional Christian one” (*Poetry of E.J. Pratt* 26)—yet he focuses primarily (and quite narrowly, chronologically speaking) on what he calls Pratt’s “three major narratives”: *The Cachalot*, *The Great Feud*, and *The Titanic*. Others, such as Pacey, discuss Pratt in terms of Christian humanism, a label that Djwa seems to reject in her description of competing rather than fully synthesized Christian and humanist values.<sup>16</sup> Moving towards the other end of this somewhat arbitrary spectrum of belief, one encounters Peter Buitenhuis, who affixes to Pratt’s poetry the label of “reverent agnosticism” (xvi), and Susan Gingell, who refers to Pratt’s prose as “liberal humanist” (*Pursuits* xxviii). In a similar vein, Earle Birney, Clark, Paul West, and Frank Davey identify Pratt’s writing on the whole with an essentially secular humanist worldview.<sup>17</sup> Finally, there are critics such as Vincent D. Sharman and Glenn Clever, who read into the poetry more definitive atheistic or anti-humanist tendencies than most.<sup>18</sup>

Faced with such widely varying views and contradictory labels, one would do well to remember, as McAuliffe rightly points out, that “few readers, however they choose to designate Pratt, would deny the presence of religious concerns in his poetry, or claim that the spiritual tradition which he inherited and the philosophical and theological

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doctrine and orthodoxy are historically and socio-culturally contingent, in Pratt’s time the Roman Catholic Church repeatedly rejected the notion that dogma evolves.

16. See, for example, Djwa’s *Evolutionary*, where she states that “Pratt’s belief is both Christian and humanistic. It is a sober acceptance of the Christ of progressive theology at the turn of the century. This Christ is a real rather than supernatural being, whose life and sacrificial death are the greatest moral examples of history” (26-27). Cf. Pacey’s “E.J. Pratt” and *Creative Writing in Canada*.

17. See, for example, Birney’s “E.J. Pratt and His Critics” (143), West’s “E.J. Pratt’s Four-Ton Gulliver” (14), and either Davey’s “E.J. Pratt: Apostle of Corporate Man” or his “E.J. Pratt: Rationalist Technician.”



studies which he later undertook left no mark on his imagination” (39). Here, I will not definitively apply to Pratt any single label, but will argue instead that his constantly evolving personal religion was shaped by a variety of equally changeable elements, including Jamesian philosophy, theological modernism, and spiritualism.

It would be reasonable for readers to question my attempt to glean new religious meanings in the well-picked field of Pratt studies, especially when McAuliffe’s monograph covers so much ground and so thoroughly details the poetry’s theological underpinnings and allusions. To be sure, her analyses of Pratt’s theses, Pauline theology, and eschatological concerns effectively supplement Pitt in methodically refuting Djwa’s speculation “that Pratt suffered a crisis in faith and came to the conclusion that he was not suited to the religious life” (*Evolutionary* 93).<sup>19</sup> However, *Between the Temple and the Cave* leaves several stones (and arguably one or two cornerstones) unturned: first, James’s impact on Pratt’s writing goes almost completely unexplored—and this despite the letters to Sutherland and Pacey mentioned above or McAuliffe’s own contention that Pratt’s “continued concern with the psychology of religion is evident in the themes and in the imagery of his poetry” (32). Second, it bears repeating that *Between the Temple and the Cave* does not include a single reference to Pratt’s séance conversion: she vaguely mentions that “Pratt’s interest in spiritualism after the writing of *The Iron Door* is documented by David Pitt,” but this lone gesture is buried in an endnote (214). McAuliffe’s seemingly deliberate omission of this aspect of Pratt’s life is somewhat suspect in a book whose subtitle denotes that it is concerned with the plural “religious

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18. See, for example, Sharman’s “Illusion” and Clever’s “Pratt as War Poet” (103).

19. Djwa also ventures that Pratt experienced “a crisis in religious belief” (*Evolutionary* 2), though in this earlier instance she seems to base her claim solely on “some of the

dimensions” of his poetry, though it is certainly no exception to a general rule dictated by Pratt himself: Pitt writes how Pratt, “fearing adverse sceptical comment,” had “played down the significance of [his first séance] experience” in a 21 May 1954 letter to Sutherland, “and asked that it not be written about for publication. But there is no question, though he was generally secretive about it, that the experience remained for him one of the pivotal events in his life” (*Master* 50). However, until Pitt’s biography was published in 1984, most critics seem to have been: 1) unaware of Pratt’s interest in spiritualism; 2) content to respect his wishes; or 3) convinced that his séance experiences did not have enough bearing on his poetry to warrant critical consideration.<sup>20</sup> Finally, and in part because of McAuliffe’s silence on this pivotal séance experience, *Between the Temple and the Cave* forces Pratt’s personal religion into an unexpectedly orthodox Christian mould,<sup>21</sup> belying both the Christian-spiritualist syncretism and Jamesian tensions manifest in his poetry.

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earlier passages in *Clay*,” whereas she later refers to the rather vague evidence of “Scattered comments from those who knew him” (93).

20. To my knowledge, since the arrival of McAuliffe’s book, only two studies on Pratt have been published: Adrian Fowler’s “E.J. Pratt and the McGill Poets” (2009) and Erica Kelly’s “‘Was Ever an Adventure Without Its Cost?’: The Price of National Unity in E.J. Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike*” (2009). In addition, a small handful of other studies have been published that mention but do not focus exclusively or at length on Pratt, including: Gregory Betts’s “‘The Destroyer’: Modernism and Mystical Revolution in Bertram Brooker” (2005) and *Avant-Garde Canadian Literature: The Early Manifestations* (2013), Sandra Campbell’s *Both Hands: A Life of Lorne Pierce of Ryerson* (2013), R.D. Francis’s *The Technological Imperative in Canada* (2009), and Ruth Panofsky’s *The Literary Legacy of the Macmillan Company of Canada* (2012). Of these, only Panofsky (129, 138) and Betts (“Destroyer” 40, 83) mention Pratt’s interest in spiritualism, but while both usefully discuss mysticism and spiritualism in a Canadian context, neither offers any information about Pratt’s spiritualist experiences that is not already supplied by Pitt.

21. In Barbara Pell’s review of McAuliffe’s book, she makes a similar argument but without acknowledging Pratt’s séance experiences, stating that, “although she refers to Pratt’s ‘ironic vision’ McAuliffe seems to assert his Christianity with more orthodoxy than is warranted by her evidence” (129).

To acknowledge that spiritualism and Jamesian philosophy contribute to Pratt's poetry is not to suggest that these elements constitute the whole of Pratt's personal religion, nor that his attitude towards them did not alter. In his poetry, criticism, letters, and hymns, one can see evidence of the continual modification of a complex personal religion, as Pratt ("Experience" 42), Pitt (*Master* 463), and McAuliffe (36) have already remarked in different ways. However, by examining Pratt's beliefs through a Jamesian lens, I hope to situate his developing poetry and poetics in relation to a broader Canadian modernist tradition, demonstrating how his poetry anticipates the kinds of personal-institutional tensions which would become so pervasive in Canadian religion and culture in the 1960s. Accordingly, I will explore how Pratt's personal religion was variously inscribed by an emergent theological modernism in the early twentieth century, by his spiritualist activities in the late 1920s, and by his embrace of Christ and Christ-like figures in the 1930s and early 1940s. While Northrop Frye may very well have been right in his oft-quoted observation that "Pratt's religious views are never obtrusive, but they organize all his poetry" ("Preface" 302), the exact nature of these views remains an open question. No one would deny that Pratt's poetry is replete with religious imagery and ideas, nor that much of it is recognizably Christian; nevertheless, the following sections will posit that Pratt's are essentially orthodox Christian beliefs only if such an orthodoxy can be said to accommodate the theological modernist challenges of Pratt's time and poetry as well as the spiritualist confirmations of an afterlife upon which his subsequent religious writing seems to have been founded.

## **2.2 "NEW SCAFFOLDING": JAMES, THEOLOGICAL MODERNISM, AND PRATT'S EARLY POETRY**

“The narratives and documents that satisfied our fathers no more satisfy us than their charts of the seas and their maps of the skies,” noted one modernist proponent [Charles Joseph Little] in an 1899 edition of *Methodist Quarterly*. “Nor are we content with their interpretations of the ancient archives. We must read and analyze, interpret, illuminate, and reconstruct them for ourselves.”  
(Lofton 384)

“Those were exciting years, stimulating, and soul-searching, for we didn’t want our Theism to crack.”  
(Pratt, Letter to John Sutherland, 8 Aug. 1952)

The New Modernist Studies, with its call for the three-pronged expansion of modernist studies in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” (Mao and Walkowitz 737), has prompted scholars to re-define literary modernism in light of past critical failures and blind spots. However, even more recently, Erik Tønning and others associated with his “Modernism and Christianity” project have pointed out that little has been done to address one of the more surprising of these blind spots: the many connections between literary modernism and theological modernism.<sup>22</sup> While neither Pratt nor James could easily be considered theological modernists according to their own self-identifications or to William R. Hutchison’s authoritative exposition of that term in *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, triangulating their writing with this distinct movement in liberal Protestantism provides critics with a theological precedent and contrast for the non-doctrinal inclinations of both writers. While Pratt’s claims to a modernist aesthetic

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22. Finn Fordham’s 2013 essay “Between Theological and Cultural Modernism: the Vatican’s *Oath against Modernism*, September 1910” offers an excellent overview of theological modernism and its connections to cultural modernism, though Fordham is less interested in the Protestant than in the Catholic origins and manifestations of theological modernism.

have been contested by critics such as Smaro Kamboureli and Gregory Betts,<sup>23</sup> his modernism needs to be addressed on multiple levels, including the theologically modernist content of his early writing.

When Pratt left Newfoundland to study at Toronto's "relatively liberal" Victoria University (McAuliffe 13) with two friends and fellow probationary ministers, W.H. Pike and S.H. Soper, he did so against the wishes of the Newfoundland Methodist Conference, since Victoria had been exposed to Darwinism, German higher criticism,<sup>24</sup> the liberal theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and David Friedrich Strauss, and the controversial teachings of George Workman and George Jackson (Pitt, *Truant* 76-78).<sup>25</sup> At the time, both the "new theology" and the "new psychology" were compatible with the views of Victoria's president, Nathanael Burwash, who—like James, Workman, George Blewett, and other intellectual beacons for the young Pratt—sought to reconcile science and religion. Soper speculated that Pratt entered the doors of the forbidden institution—above which Burwash had had emblazoned "The Truth Shall Make You Free" (John 8.32)<sup>26</sup>—as much to distance himself from the fundamentalism of "his father's Methodist faith" as out of an intellectual, somewhat naïve need to "set out on a kind of *quest*, which had as its goal nothing less than Truth – with a capital T!" (Pitt, *Truant* 87; emphasis in

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23. For two of the more recent and productive discussions of Pratt's contested modernism, see Djwa's "Pratt's Modernism" and Guth's "Virtu(e)al History."

24. German higher criticism is a form of historical criticism that gained traction in Germany in the nineteenth century. For more on higher criticism and its influence in North America, see, for example, William R. Hutchison's *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*.

25. For more on the liberal Protestant heritage and milieu of Victoria University, see, for example, Airhart ("Ordering" 112); McAuliffe (17); Pitt (*Truant* 88-91); Semple; and Sissons.

26. Semple records this anecdote and also observes that the inscription was made, at Burwash's request, "During the Workman controversy . . . as a reminder of the need for uninhibited inquiry in the quest for Christ" (509).

original). In “The Scientific Character of Psychology,” a 1913 essay Pratt penned shortly after his appointment as a lecturer in psychology, he still seemed to believe in science’s quickening march towards objective Truth: he speaks glowingly of “the sanctity of facts” (40), and he goes on to state that the new science of psychology, like the liberal context out of which it was born, is “kindled by the modern spirit of progress” (43).

Such unequivocal celebrations of reason, empiricism, or progress would seldom be repeated in Pratt’s writing: like the theological modernists, whose characteristic “religiously-based progressivism” (Hutchison 2) would be choked out by the brutal realities of the First World War (Hutchison 256), his personal tragedies and early exposure to death and human suffering<sup>27</sup> eventually taught him to elide such unguarded moments of optimism from his verse. Of course, a similar development occurred in literary modernism as well: many American and British war poets quickly turned away from the patriotic, sentimental anthems of Rupert Brooke to the more realistic, fragmented modernist verse of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Isaac Rosenberg. Although in Pratt’s case a modernist belief in progress would re-appear much later in modulated forms,<sup>28</sup> no major Pratt critic has failed to note how his obsession with atavism or evolutionary regression repeatedly tempers his belief in progress along religious, scientific, or moral lines.<sup>29</sup> As James had quipped in *Varieties*, “The idea of a

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27. Djwa and Moyles provide a concise summary of Pratt’s many losses in what they appropriately label a “litany of death” (xix).

28. In poems such as *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, *They Are Returning*, and *Towards the Last Spike*, for example, Pratt’s belief in progress appears under the guise of a religious nationalism that coincides with Canada’s assertions of sovereignty in the Second World War and with the related increase in nationalist sentiment that would climax in the 1960s.

29. Examples of atavism in Pratt’s writing include: Julian’s awareness in *Clay* of humankind’s “Sterile progression! Where each life repeats / The racial circuit” (334) and of “Sin as a ‘taint in the blood’” (McAuliffe 71); Pratt’s repudiation of the false “god of Progress” in “Changing Standpoints” (89); the interconnections between cultural

universal evolution lends itself to a doctrine of general meliorism and progress which fits the religious needs of the healthy-minded [that is, late nineteenth-century liberal theologians] so well that it seems almost as if it might have been created for their use” (91).<sup>30</sup> However, the progressivist vision that buoyed the theological modernists for a time rested on a materialist and rationalist foundation which James, Pratt, and the theological modernists themselves would come to reject in different ways.

Even Pratt’s first collection of poems, *Newfoundland Verse* (1923), foreshadows his turn away from scientific materialism and towards the kind of subjective idealism shared by Schleiermacher and James.<sup>31</sup> “Overheard in a Cove,” for example, contains a self-parodic indictment of an overly serious liberal “Scholar” preaching higher criticism, evolution, and empiricism involved in a theological debate with “The Old Salt,” a fundamentalist who stubbornly “stands by Moses” (84). Their verbal conflict, which is merely “overheard,” is related by a speaker whose dramatic distance from the two combatants implies Pratt’s ideological distance from both of the extreme theological perspectives being advocated. His own position is very likely a compromise between that of the Scholar and the Old Salt, combining his admiration for the heroic sailors and “fine

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modernism and primitivism Pratt notes in the fiction of D.H. Lawrence, the author with whom Pratt aligned himself against “the humanistic rationalist who thinks that the human brain is the last perfect word in the evolutionary scheme” (“D.H. Lawrence” 193); “The Prize Cat,” a poem which Pratt introduced to reading audiences as “a little study in atavism” (“The Prize Cat” 94); “Come Away, Death,” with its “cultural reversion” (Pitt, *Master* 267) and tour back in time “Beyond the stammers of the Java caves” (53); and *Dunkirk’s* genealogy of the Britons (114-15), which prompted Sutherland to suggest the possibility “that at some future time they will relapse into barbarism” (*Poetry of E.J. Pratt* 6). Djwa and McAuliffe do an excellent job analyzing atavistic imagery and themes in Pratt’s poetry, though for the purposes of my own argument McAuliffe and Pitt (see, for example, *Truant* 60) are most helpful, since they discuss the problem of atavism as a specifically religious dilemma.

30. Cf. Airhart, “Ordering” (111).

God-fearin' sort" of his Newfoundland childhood with his empathic appreciation of intellectuals "who forged their faith from honest doubt" (73). Pratt was not against the application of science to life, or to scientific progress more generally; science was "a form of poetry," too ("Relation" 26). Marconi's wireless telegraphy and other discoveries of his time occasionally instilled in Pratt "the sense of conquest over Nature," or at least "the trust in science for the prevention of the grosser human calamities" ("Memories" 7). However, scientific optimism of any sort is always countered in his poetry by an awareness of technology's inability to protect human beings from "the clamant menace of the sea" ("Overheard" 79).<sup>32</sup> The Scholar's dogmatic belief in a scientifically grounded notion of progress registers as pure arrogance, and his evolutionary boast of humankind's "successive climbs" (81) is tacitly undermined by the morally devastated post-war context in which the poem was published. Yet the poem ends in a stalemate, a doubly parodic sketch of religious positions that are either too unthinking or too unfeeling, founded either on a biblical literalism exploded by evolution and higher criticism or on a materialism that fails to account for "the soul's discernin' / Of spiritual things" (81).

Paradoxically, the distinctly Jamesian anti-doctrinal and anti-institutional sentiments expressed in Pratt's writing show the influence of both his fundamentalist Methodist upbringing and his later encounters with modernist theology. Undoubtedly, Pratt's preference for personal over institutional forms of religion stemmed from what McAuliffe calls "the native evangelical impatience with theological formulation and with institutional religion which was to be [his] birthright" (46). In *United to Serve* (1927), a

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31. On Schleiermacher's subjective idealism, see McAuliffe (14, 37); on James's, see Shook (63) and Clark (9).

32. This theme is expressed most pointedly, and perhaps developed most poignantly, in *The Titanic* (1935).



pageant Pratt helped write to commemorate the founding of the United Church of Canada,<sup>33</sup> he articulates one of the sources of his inherited “impatience” in his retelling of the story of Christianity, castigating “Outward ceremonial, / The fashion of obedience to a God / Remote from life,” which “had fallen like a frost / Upon Church worship in the eighteenth century” (“[Back]” 11). In the speech by the figure of “Methodism” that follows, Pratt diligently presents the teachings of John Wesley as a corrective to this damaging trajectory of institutionalization: the itinerant preacher “called men to God’s altars” (11), not to altars built by human hands. Yet Pratt was obviously not categorically opposed to institutional religion; instead, passages such as the above merely illuminate what Robert J. Gibbs, commenting on Pratt’s irony, refers to as his “distrust of closed systems of thought and belief” (ii),<sup>34</sup> which was evident already in *Clay*, an unpublished “verse drama” written between 1918 and 1920 (Pitt, *Truant* 182-83). In that work, Pratt dismisses Merrivale, “a traditionalist” who “is fond of statutes, saws, / Rescripts and sanctities” and feels “he must defend a stable world” (305, 309). Clearly Pratt, like James, did not believe that such a world existed.

Pratt’s anti-institutional leanings seem to have been reinforced by modernist theology, which emphasized above all “the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture” (Hutchison 2). In his doctoral dissertation, *Studies in Pauline*

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33. The United Church of Canada was formed as a result of the union of the Methodist Church of Canada, the Congregational Union of Canada, and a majority of the Presbyterian Church of Canada and the General Council of Union Churches on 10 June 1925. Pratt’s contribution to *United to Serve* consisted of six hymns and numerous character speeches (Laakso 473-74).

34. That Djwa’s Pratt fits with the Jamesian interpretation provided here is suggested by the fact that, in her reading, Pratt was “not suited to the religious life” (that is, the institutional and fundamentalist religious life of someone like his father, John Pratt) and yet was “An essentially religious man, at least in the sense that he accepts the mystic

*Eschatology and Its Background* (1917), he posits “that the processes of analysis, abstraction and synthesis were continuously operative in the concept-construction [of the early Christian church]” (201). Paul’s missionary work is regarded as having been effective precisely because he eschewed fixed systems in favour of flexible, syncretistic, and sympathetic responses to “local” needs (115). Pratt proves himself cognizant, then, of what Kathryn Lofton, in her revisionary study of theological modernism in America, calls “the emphasis in modernist writings . . . on ‘method’ or ‘process’” (379). Summarizing this fundamental feature of modernist thought, she writes,

Although Protestant modernism was largely a movement waged among scholars and seminarians, scribbling in their austere enclaves, there was nothing passive about Protestant modernism. It was an aggressive, demanding process of cross-examination and inquiry, a process that transformed the terming of biblical narrative and Christian faith within universities, Protestant churches, and American culture. Although Hutchison's eschatological triad (adaptation, divine immanence, and progress) certainly appears within these Protestant writings as pronounced aspirations, the majority of the texts authored by self-described modernists focus on the tactics of process, not on the ends of such processing.

(378)

By commenting on how Jesus and Paul both appropriate and adapt existing philosophies, religious traditions, and language, and by treating the scriptures in which they appear as objects that must be interrogated constantly in light of contemporary cultural developments, Pratt enters into a theological conversation initiated by nineteenth-century

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experience” (that is, the kind of personal religious experience advocated by James) (*Evolutionary* 93).

liberal Protestants but vigorously continued by the modernists of his own day.

Furthermore, this modernist understanding of process correlates with the fallibilist core of James's pragmatic philosophy, which undermines "the great assumption of the intellectualists . . . that truth means essentially an inert static relation" (*Pragmatism* 96). But Pratt's embrace of process—whether traced back to James, to the writings of theological modernists at Canadian and American institutions, or to both—also echoes Methodist beliefs held outside of North America: in a 1913 *Sydney Morning Herald* article entitled "Modernism: The Methodist View," for example, a British-born Methodist minister serving in Australia is reported to have said that "Fixed creeds meant the arrest of thought and development, which was contrary to the will of God" (14). Of course, the first half of this quotation could just as well be from James, for whom "Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition" (*Varieties* 30). According to this Jamesian perspective, whatever is open, fluid, or vibrant in one's personal religion is in danger of becoming closed, static, or stagnant in its institutional forms. Pratt's master's thesis, "The Demonology of the New Testament in Its Relation to Earlier Developments, and to the Mind of Christ" (1912), had even gone so far as to locate the "demonic" in a prominent religious group: "If [Christ] believed in the activity of Satan and his vast confederacy of demons," he speculates, "then its most complete expression was to be found where the age never dreamed it to exist, – in the cultured circles of the Pharisees" (29). Nevertheless, a more positive interpretation of the relationship between personal and institutional religion is possible when one keeps in mind Frye's remark that "Christianity has always been both a revolutionary and an institutionalized religion"

(“Silence” 392): for Pratt, “the ashes of our altars” (“Ode to December, 1917”)<sup>35</sup> can give rise to new and vital religious formations, either as a result of outright “revolution” or through the ongoing, inevitable processes of religious syncretism.<sup>36</sup>

Like the image of religion it espoused, theological modernism was mutable, and it is possible that Pratt’s knowledge of the instability of religious institutions and ideas paradoxically helped him to maintain his own core beliefs when the jarring realities of personal loss and modern warfare could not always be reconciled easily with an inherited Christianity. In the concluding quatrain to the war poem “Before an Altar,”<sup>37</sup> Pratt invites his audience to re-think religion in response to modernity and the unimaginable violence of the First World War, insofar as they constitute a threat to everyday routine and ritual in religious as well as personal spheres:

Blurred is the rubric now,  
And shadowy the token,  
When blood is on the brow,  
And the frail body broken. (9-12)

The editors of *E.J. Pratt: Complete Poems* gloss “rubric” as a term that, “in this context,” signifies “direction for the conduct of a service of public worship” (1: 375). In other

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35. Cf. *Clay*, in which Julian describes “trampled altars” in connection with “dead and formless embers” (313).

36. McAuliffe flags several instances of syncretism in “Demonology” (see, for example, 19), and Sutherland notes a “general syncretism” in Pratt’s *Studies (Poetry of E.J. Pratt 70)*. As well, Pratt’s metaphor of the cauldron in *The Witches’ Brew* is also a likely nod to syncretism and the fact that our religious ideas and institutions are a strange brew of conflicting ingredients. As Martin and Leopold point out, this kind of view of Christianity as a “syncretistic formation” had already gained currency among religious historians at the turn of the twentieth century (96).

37. While “Before an Altar” contains no explicit war imagery, Pratt establishes its war context through the subtitle, “After Gueudecourt,” which alludes to the Royal Newfoundland Regiment’s victory over the Germans at Gueudecourt, France, in 1916.

words, war has broken the spell of a liturgy that formerly guided worshippers' conduct both within and outside of the formal church service, a rupture which is mirrored on the level of form, too, as the poem's iambic trimeter is similarly "Blurred" and "broken": the tenth line fits the established "rubric" of the poem only if the second syllable of "token" is swallowed, and the final line unsettles the fixed iambic trimeter altogether. Both the form and content of "Before an Altar" therefore suggest that a new rubric—or what Donaldson in *Clay* refers to metaphorically as "new scaffolding" (308)—is necessary once war has shown liberal progressivism to be unfounded. While I would grant that "the narrator cannot affirm a transcendent Christianity" (Djwa, *Evolutionary* 7), neither can the narrator affirm an immanent Christianity. To conclude, as Djwa does, that the Christ-like nature of the soldiers' sacrifice necessarily implies "the divinity of man" (7), is to ascribe divinity to humanity in a poem that foregrounds humanity's collective failure to peacefully co-exist. Yet there is hope here still for the kind of redemption connoted by the constellation of objects and symbols associated with the celebration of the Eucharist—such as "bread" (1, 6), a "cup" (2), "wine" (4), "the salver" (5), a communion "token" (10), "blood" (11), and a "body broken" (12)—even if these objects currently seem emptied of their symbolic and redemptive power, or if the hope they signify is postponed for a time when, "Perhaps, some other day, / Shrovetide will come again" (7-8).

Even before the war, James had attempted to move beyond rubrics and rituals in *Varieties*, which repeatedly states his preference for personal over institutional forms of religious experience.<sup>38</sup> In Pratt's poetry, this same preference is illustrated through

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38. See, for example, *Varieties* (30-31, 430-31, and 433).

metonymic references to the heart and head: whereas the head (or brain) is used to represent concepts such as reason, the intellect, and dogma, the heart often symbolizes what Jeremy Carrette, in summarizing James's text, describes as the private "religious feelings, or experiences, [that] precede myths, dogma and creeds" (88). Because these feelings and experiences, which shape one's personal religion, precede the dogmas, creeds, and other products of institutional religion and the intellect, James "sides with the religion of the heart over that of the head" (18), as Charles Taylor notes in *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Taylor then goes on to supply an intellectual lineage for James and his religion of the heart:

He stands in the succession of that late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century revolt against intellectualism in religion, following the Pietists and John Wesley in Christianity, the Hassidim in Judaism, which sees the fullness of religious commitment as lying in powerful emotions and their expression, rather than in the nuances of doctrine or the perfections of scholarship. (18)

As a public intellectual and promoter of the science of religions, James was, himself, committed to "the perfections of scholarship," and this irony has not been lost on critics such as Graham Bird (186). Nevertheless, James's religion of the heart does not exclude the intellect entirely; it simply favours instinctual religious feelings and immediate experiences over ones that are mediated primarily by the head or intellect.

As multiple critics have remarked, the same tension between heart and head is operative throughout Pratt's epics, lyrics, hymns, and lectures—though again, the influence of James in this respect has been overlooked or ignored.<sup>39</sup> Pratt, writing to

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39. See, for example, Sutherland's *The Poetry of E.J. Pratt: A New Interpretation*, which discusses "the antithesis of reason and instinct" in *The Great Feud* (86) and *The Witches'*

Carlyle King, says the “conflict between ‘heart and brain’ has consistently been with me, though it has been neglected in favour of the ‘story’ element. As you may know, Frye has often emphasized that collision” (Letter, 15 Aug. 1956). Oddly enough, King’s essay itself does not actually mention the “heart and brain,” gesturing to such a “collision” only indirectly and never in connection with James. In any case, it is clear—as I will explain below in my discussion of *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, for example—that Pratt, like James, does not dismiss reason altogether: in Sutherland’s estimation, Pratt “shares the belief of D.H. Lawrence (though he has none of Lawrence’s sentimentality), that the balance of the personality has been upset today by an *exaggerated emphasis* on the reason at the expense of the instincts” (*Poetry of E.J. Pratt* 89; emphasis in original).

While Pratt’s preference for the heart over the head is unambiguous enough, his religious beliefs align him much more with James’s ideology, which stands in opposition to the dogmatism of scientific materialism, than with Lawrence’s primitivism. As he explained to Sutherland regarding James’s *Varieties*,

I was impressed by his own confession that his theistic beliefs were very thin and unsatisfactory to an audience largely favouring providential or paternalistic qualities in God. He calls his own attitude an “over-belief” which you mention in your quotation – that subconscious welling up of something within us which baffles formulation.<sup>40</sup> Not that he accepts dogmatically (or rationalistically) an orthodox or evangelical position – not at all, but he is not far from the Methodist

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*Brew* (87) and ultimately concludes that Pratt successfully resolves this and other tensions due to “the fundamental balance of his vision” (108); Pacey’s “E.J. Pratt,” with its diagnosis of “surely one of the basic problems of the universe – the relation between reason and instinct” (193); and McAuliffe’s *Between the Temple and the Cave*, which describes this tension in Pauline terms (50).

emphasis on the phrase – “I have *felt*.” That sounds mystical, but it is an ineradicable element in the nature of many people, sailors sharing it to an unusual degree. Without wishing to sermonize, I find it expressed in Job’s statement – “though he slay me yet I will trust in him[”];<sup>41</sup> and it helps, at least *emotionally*, to resolve the dualism in the interest of theistic unity. Such a feeling may not be present at the time of the announcement of a shipwreck, but it asserts itself in the subsequent groping for a faith. (With some people.)

I feel that myself at times, though my themes have largely been realistic and tragic where the dualism is paramount.

(Letter, 11 Aug. 1952; emphasis in original)<sup>42</sup>

I have quoted from this letter at length for several reasons: first of all, it provides a rare because intimate glimpse of Pratt’s religious convictions and thought processes; second, because it maps out points of correspondence among James’s philosophy, Methodism, mystical or folk traditions, and elements of Pratt’s own personal religion; and third, because its attribution of over-beliefs to Job helps to explain *Clay*, which is similar “in its tone and conclusions to the book of Job” (McAuliffe 79), as well as subsequent poetic embodiments of doubt and the apparently unresolved dualism between the heart’s faith and the head’s reason. When Pratt confesses, “I feel that myself at times,” he seems to be referring to his own over-belief, his need to trust in God, against reason, in order to “resolve the dualism in the interest of theistic unity” for pragmatic if not theological purposes. But what is most notable from a literary-critical perspective, perhaps, is Pratt’s

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40. James defines over-beliefs as “buildings-out performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint” (*Varieties* 431).

41. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13.15a).

42. A portion of this letter is also quoted in Pitt (*Master* 462).



subsequent suggestion that his poetry's repeated staging of conflicts between faith and reason might reflect less the current state of his own religious health than it does his need, as a poet, to dramatize such moments of conflict or doubt for his audience.

With this poetic need for conflict in mind, it is difficult to read *Clay* as it has often been read: as an autobiographical record of Pratt's turn from God. In any case, it is surely more than an early, failed experiment "full of theories and reflection of theories, ethical maxims, philosophical truisms, bald, very bald generalizations" (Pratt, "On Publishing" 31). Although textual evidence from *Clay* could certainly be used to bolster either of these readings, I would argue instead that the text supports a Jamesian interpretation, to the extent that it dramatizes the ways in which experiences of suffering and doubt may bear the fruit of a more authentic and holistic faith. While Clark and McAuliffe have already plumbed the philosophical and theological depths of the poem in great detail, neither have commented at length on the figure of Thaddeus, the "seer" (*Clay* 305) whose Jamesian, Job-like over-belief in the goodness of "a nobler master" (354) seems to act as the only antidote to his friend Julian's unrelenting pessimism. Coincidentally, the lone passage from Job that Pratt includes in his letter to Sutherland—"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13.15a)—is also quoted in *Varieties* (42); but the importance of this quotation to both Pratt and James goes beyond mere coincidence: like Julian, who ultimately follows Thaddeus's promptings, Job is a quintessential Jamesian figure in that he accepts on faith what he does not—and cannot—understand through reason alone, especially given his profound experiences of suffering.

In Pratt's hands, neither Julian's pessimistic rationalism nor Merrivale's blinkered optimism alone can be spun into a satisfactory vessel of faith. Like the Scholar's

empiricism in “Overheard in a Cove” or the kind of “logic-chopping rationalistic talk” James disparages in *Varieties* (73), Julian’s reason-based approach to life serves immediate pragmatic purposes but fails to effect religious belief. For both Pratt and James, Job’s approach to faith is admirable because it grapples with, then miraculously accommodates, the problem of evil; it is not what James calls “healthy-minded,” nor is it completely “morbid-minded.” Instead, it undergoes a “process of unification” that results in “extreme relief” of a distinctly religious variety (*Varieties* 175). In this way, Job offers Pratt a model, if not an articulate response, for countering the problem of evil—“Pratt’s essential difficulty” (McAuliffe 40)<sup>43</sup>—in a manner consistent with both Christianity and James’s philosophy. Just as the theological modernists had to re-calibrate their progressivism after the First World War, Pratt had to find for his poetry a theodicy equal to the realities of human suffering, and it is possible that he found it—though perhaps not a medium suitable for its most effective expression—in *Clay*.

For reasons already cited, Pratt would later deem *Clay* an aesthetic failure, pronouncing it “exceedingly dull and verbose” (Letter to E.K. Brown, 20 Apr. 1942). Yet it is interesting to note that, despite the poem’s obvious faults, Pratt would also go on to tell E.K. Brown, in a letter written just twelve days later, that “the conclusion of *Clay* did represent my viewpoint and does yet – *more or less*. I can never see Nihilism behind any struggle” (qtd. in Pitt, *Truant* 182; emphasis in original). Indeed, the poem’s open and tentatively optimistic ending suggests that Thaddeus’s way of the heart provides the only tolerable, and therefore the only acceptable, guiding philosophy: “At the end there are,” McAuliffe believes, “signs in Pratt as in Julian of a new maturity that is marked by a

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43. Cf. Pratt’s comment in an interview with Ronald Hambleton: “We were brought up in the belief of the goodness of God and yet we had to reconcile tragedy with it. We were

tolerance of the ambiguity and mystery of life” (60). What she does not observe is that it is Thaddeus, with his emphasis on intuition rather than reason,<sup>44</sup> who finally seems to inspire this tolerance; the heart, not the head, is the locus of his non-doctrinal, mystical faith, a fact suggested by the etymology of Thaddeus’s name itself.<sup>45</sup> Given all of these textual and intertextual resonances, the extent to which Thaddeus’s role is downplayed in McAuliffe’s synopsis of *Clay* is somewhat surprising. Similarly, Clark takes the focus away from Thaddeus and focuses his attention on the minor character Penrose, “a humanist who, advocating a position similar to that offered by William James in ‘The Will to Believe,’ believes in the indomitable spirit of man to believe and to act on belief in his ideals until they are wrested from reality” (12). But Thaddeus, a major character, also advocates this same kind of Jamesian over-belief, and the poem ends with Penrose playing the part of a chorus member, praising Thaddeus instead of espousing his own views (356). And despite what Djwa claims,<sup>46</sup> what is dramatized at the conclusion of *Clay* is not the end of faith, but the possibility of faith and the validity of the kind of subjective idealism embodied in Thaddeus’s religion of the heart. The volta of Julian’s final speech (“And yet, there is a knocking in this clay” [355]) announces the first signs of what may prove to be a religious transformation: his cautious new receptivity may yet stoke the “restless flame” of his spirit, causing it to “leap the grammared confines of slow

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always under that shadow” (“Interview” 43).

44. In a letter to Sutherland, Pratt writes: “The only significance the poem [*Clay*] (so-called) possesses is that it did represent a lot of philosophical speculation current at the time in the University of Toronto. Much of it is abstract and wooden as I see it now. It was mainly an account of the difference between Intuitionism and Rationalism” (Letter, 21 May 1954).

45. Certain reference materials published before Pratt began his studies, such as W.F. Wilkinson’s *Personal Names in the Bible* (1865), note that Thaddeus, one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus, was also named Lebbeus, which means “heart” in Hebrew (489).

46. See Djwa (*Evolutionary* 2, 93).

speech, / And give the echo to [Thaddeus's] dancing words" (355).

Whatever the outcome in *Clay*, Pitt's vague assertion that "in the end it is a more or less Christian conception of the world that prevails" ("Methodism" 230)—which gives the echo to Pratt's "*more or less*," above—needs further qualification, especially considering Pratt's modernist understanding of the mutability of religious institutions and beliefs. Julian's turn away from pure rationalism and towards Thaddeus's emphasis on intuition aligns him with the kind of theological modernism described by Lofton, in which the ongoing process of re-interpreting one's beliefs is stressed over the actual content or object of one's beliefs: "How you believe, for the modernists, was your belief" (Lofton 379). Again, Pratt was similar to the modernists in this and other respects, but Lofton adds a much-needed caveat that applies equally to his own case: "by pointing to a certain lopsided modernist obsession with method," she writes, "I am not suggesting that modernists were completely disinterested in ends, in the consequences of Christian belief. Nothing could be further from the truth" (379). Whereas the modernist emphasis on process was construed by some as a threat to Christianity to the extent that it "necessarily undermined the institutional orthodoxy upon which religious institutions rely" (Lofton 381), James's anti-institutional philosophy seemed to embrace process for precisely this reason. As David H. Evans notes, for James "it is not the substance, but the result of belief that matters" ("Chains" 182).

To be sure, though, James takes this open-ended methodology to an extreme that was acceptable only to some "liberal philosophers of religion"—namely, those modernists who were not worried by "pragmatism's apparent lack of commitment to definite ends of any kind" but instead "accepted and exploited the opportunity it

presented” (Hutchison 210). However, an unregulated emphasis on process poses a problem, as Taylor points out in his discussion of *Varieties*: “the devotional, practical, and (if any) sacramental way of life needs some minimum articulation of what it is all about: some propositional formulations are unavoidable—about God, creation, Christ, and the like. . . . The faith, the hope are *in* something” (*Varieties of Religion* 26; emphasis in original).

In Pratt’s case, the clearest articulations of his privately held religious views would not come until later, in poems such as “The Truant” or in his letters to close friends. In the years during and shortly after the First World War, at least, the contours of his personal religion seem to be reflected in his poetry just as much through negative as through positive definition: he rejects the fundamentalist aspects of his father’s Methodism embodied by the Old Salt, Julian’s rationalism, and Merrivale’s unwarranted optimism, but what Pratt himself affirms is less obvious.

Perhaps one could argue, then, that he follows T.H. Huxley in viewing “a deep sense of religion [as] compatible with the complete absence of theology” (qtd. in Pratt, “Huxley” 189). Yet Pratt would maintain ties with the Methodist Church of Canada and its successor, the United Church of Canada, a biographical detail that highlights one of the key differences between Pratt and James. Pitt notes that, “Although formal religion, to quote Pratt’s widow, ‘came to rest rather lightly on his shoulders,’<sup>47</sup> Pratt remained in many ways a ‘religious’ person to the end of his life. Though some critics have read scepticism, agnosticism, even atheism into his work, I know that they are mistaken”

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47. Pitt uses this same quotation from his 1968 interview with Viola Pratt in his earlier biography, but in that context it appears as if her comment about religion “rest[ing] rather lightly on his shoulders” refers specifically to “the years since his escape from theology

("Methodism" 230).<sup>48</sup> As we have seen, there is evidence to suggest that the real tension in his poetry during this same period was not a tension that resulted in a loss of faith, but between his personal religion and what Pitt calls "formal religion" ("Methodism" 230). McAuliffe comes to a similar conclusion, though in a manner that seems to present Pratt's Methodist and Jamesian anti-institutional leanings as a weakness: "For him," she writes, "religion would always be a way of life rather than a system of beliefs – and it is always possible that a failure to integrate these facets satisfactorily (one that was inherent in his tradition) may have compounded his problem. Nevertheless, Pratt claimed that in Christianity, human beings might find all the elements that give meaning to life" (203). While it is true that Pratt tended to see religion as "a way of life rather than a system of beliefs," I would describe this Jamesian preference not in pejorative terms as "a failure" or "problem," but as evidence of a complex personal religion in which the tension between Christianity in its institutional and anti-institutional forms is an animating rather than enervating force. McAuliffe ties Pratt to a Methodism torn between "extreme subjectivism" and "legal moralism" (47), and this reductive association allows her to make claims for similar dichotomies in Pratt's poetry itself.

As his early poetry's affinities with theological modernism suggest, Pratt was able to navigate such extremes in his adoption and continual adaptation of a fluid, non-dogmatic personal religion. Following James and the theological modernists of his time, though, his search for "new scaffolding" (*Clay* 308) paradoxically led him to be wary of religious frameworks altogether. As Thaddeus says in *Clay*, "The groundwork's there to build a structure on" (353)—but during Pratt's years as a student and young instructor in

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and the pulpit" (*Master* 7)—that is, only from around 1917 until sometime before the publication of *The Iron Door* in 1927.

psychology and English at Victoria University, the “structure” and content of his personal religion was still relatively undefined, and his poetry bears witness to the fact that the theological ground upon which such structures might be built had undergone seismic shifts in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Even so, *Clay*’s Jamesian, Job-like response to the problem of evil provided the fledgling writer with a philosophy commensurate to the experiences of one who had “forged [his] faith from honest doubt” (“Overheard” 40) and who, in his many early encounters with suffering and death, “had sought for truth, but found the world / Outside the soul betray the one within” (*Iron Door* 209).

### **2.3 “HIDDEN SPRINGS”: THE MYSTICAL AND SPIRITUALIST SOURCES OF PRATT’S PERSONAL RELIGION**

“The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very broad sense.”  
(James, Letter to Henry W. Rankin, 16 June 1901; qtd. in Niebuhr 230)

“I had no criticism [of the poem ‘Hidden Springs’] to offer because I knew it came right from your own ‘Hidden Springs’ and that sort of source is sacred.”  
(Pratt, Letter to Jenny O’Hara Pincock, 2 Nov. 1944)

Between the publication of *Newfoundland Verse* in 1923 and *Brébeuf and His Brethren* in 1940, Pratt would perfect the “objective” documentary style of poetry on which his reputation as Canada’s leading poet was largely based. However, it was during this same period that he also wrote his most personal verse, including *The Iron Door: An Ode* (1927) and a spate of mystical lyrics published in *Many Moods* (1932) and *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems* (1937). Some of these poems are “mystical” only in the

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48. Cf. McAuliffe (64, 215).

“very broad sense” allowed by James’s definition of that term (Niebuhr 230), while others, such as *The Iron Door* and “The Empty Room,” recount religious visions that must be read in light of multiple events and circumstances: Pratt’s readings in spiritualism; the dream that inspired him to write *The Iron Door*; his séance encounter with the spirits of his deceased mother and father; and the near-death of Claire, his only child. The evidence available to critics in Pratt’s poetry and correspondence makes it abundantly clear that he was more than casually interested in elements of mysticism and spiritualism—although it is equally clear that the symbols, ideas, and convictions he gleaned from both supplemented rather than supplanted his pre-existing Christian beliefs. Nevertheless, Pratt’s séance experiences and the impact of these experiences on his poetry have been virtually ignored.<sup>49</sup> By continuing to examine Pratt’s poetry through a Jamesian lens, I will attempt to address this critical lacuna, demonstrating not only how Pratt’s séance conversion marked a dramatic turning point in his private spiritual life but also how his interest in spiritualism manifested itself in his public poetry in a manner consistent with some of the Jamesian themes and conclusions of his earlier writing.

In *The Iron Door*, for example, the Jamesian over-belief or religion of the heart championed by Thaddeus in *Clay* becomes the fulcrum upon which the later poem’s climactic conclusion rests. Curiously, Pratt published this ode—which he said was “a sort of mystical vision” (qtd. in Pitt, *Master* 7), and which he originally titled *A Vision of the Iron Door* (Laakso 387)—in 1927, “the ‘annus mirabilis’ of the modern occultist movement in Canada” (Betts, “Destroyer” 273). Unlike *Clay*, however, *The Iron Door* features two partial religious “proofs”: the speaker witnesses a group of people pass

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49. Again, one of the few exceptions to this general rule is Pitt’s *Truant* (see, for example, 30-31).



through Death's doors into the afterlife and thus shares in their ecstasy—if only vicariously, as a kind of voyeur (213); and the poem itself is framed as a religious “dream” (211, 212) that serves to memorialize the speaker's transformation and newfound convictions even after his “vision passed away” (213). Still, the poem serves primarily as a record of faith and the operations of faith, not as a final proof of any kind: “I do not aim at solutions,” confessed Pratt to William Arthur Deacon (Letter, 27 Aug. 1927). As Pitt suggests, on a more personal level *The Iron Door* also assumed “the nature of a wish-fulfilling dream-vision that stopped short of complete revelation,” since it was written “not in the full conviction of human immortality that would come to him later,” after his first séance, “but yet from a profound desire and hope for such” (*Master* 10). In the poem, the figure modeled on Pratt's mother can pass beyond the Iron Door of Death precisely because she carries with her “the full conviction of human immortality”: indeed, Pratt tells Deacon how the poem “originated in a dream where my mother, who was a woman of the profoundest faith in the life to come, was standing before a colossal door – the door of Death – and expecting without any fear of denial whatsoever, instant and full admission into the future state” (Letter to Deacon, 27. Aug. 1927); she possesses “a calm reliance that the door / Would open and disclose / Those who by swifter strides had gone ahead” (208).

In the sense that this mother figure is granted “full admission into the future state” because of her over-belief (“that root faith within a woman's heart” [212]), *The Iron Door* could be seen to signal a Fideist turn in Pratt's poetry: as in Thaddeus's religion of the heart, faith is occasionally in conflict with—and takes precedence over—reason. In referring to the mother's “traditional leap of faith” (*Evolutionary* 56), for instance, Djwa

tacitly invokes Kierkegaard, whose philosophy is frequently described in relation to a Fideist position. A similar “leap” of faith also features in one of Penrose’s speeches in *Clay* (346), which Clark justifiably reads in terms of a Jamesian “will to believe” (24), but in *The Iron Door* faith effects pragmatic results for which the protagonists of *Clay* can only hope. “I have often heard it said,” the speaker remarks, “That a fool’s belief in the incredible, / Joined to the sounding magic of a name, / Makes up the stuff of miracle” (211). Continuing to reflect on what finally caused the door to open, the speaker wonders if over-belief in the form of the final supplicant’s “strange unreason” (212) may have produced this inexplicable result, though he is forced to conclude, “I do not know; / But in the dream the door began to move” (212). As with Thaddeus’s religion of the heart, the object of this woman’s unreasoning faith is unclear, although Pratt intimates that it operates outside of the outmoded “rubric” of institutional religion deemed equally insufficient in “Before an Altar”: in the poem’s “darkest moment,” the speaker laments “the arrest / Of hope when every rubric paled / Before the Theban mockery of the crest” (211). However, Djwa argues that the religious faith that survives here is still compatible with Christianity, aptly quoting Romans 8.24 regarding “the orthodox Pauline view that man cannot have tangible ‘proof’ for his religious hope” (*Evolutionary* 53)—a view that also corresponds with Fideism. For James, as for some of the theological modernists who followed in his wake, the strength of the Fideist position lay just as much in its Pauline rejection of a materialist insistence on evidence or empiricist proofs as in its celebration of the human will to believe. Yet to mention Fideism here is to return, in a way, to the problem presented by the theological modernist emphasis on the process rather than the ends of belief: Fideism in its strictest sense entails not so much an inability to

conceptualize the object of one's faith through reason, but an unwillingness to do so.

In *The Iron Door*, though, the speaker is unable, not unwilling, to make sense of his second-hand vision of life beyond the not-so-pearly gates—and again, this is a problem that resonates with James's philosophy, particularly his classification of “four marks” of mystical religious experiences (*Varieties* 380). Essentially, this is a problem of communication, of translation: personal religious experiences—such as the kind of dream-vision reproduced in Pratt's poem—are powerful yet ineffable;<sup>50</sup> the moment they are communicated for the benefit of others, or the moment they are co-opted by institutional religion, they become (to transplant a phrase from another of Pratt's contemporaries) what one might call “a diminished thing” (Frost 14). Still, while the speaker in *The Iron Door* fails to solve the “*hoary riddle of the dead*” through reason and thus cannot share an answer to this riddle with readers (212; emphasis in original), he derives comfort from other sources.

James, returning once more to the subject of theodicy and the Book of Job, provides a description that could be applied just as well to Pratt and to the stymied speaker of his poem in this climactic moment of frustration: “An intellect perplexed and baffled, yet a trustful sense of presence—such is the situation of the man who is sincere with himself and with the facts, but who remains religious still” (*Varieties* 448). Without understanding what is happening around him, the speaker of Pratt's poem feels a lasting “sense” that the supplicants gathered at the Iron Door are finally able to overcome Death because of their patience and great faith:

Beyond the threshold of the door,

I could not see; I only knew  
That those who had been standing, waiting there,  
Were passing through;  
And while it was not given me to know  
Whither their journey led, I had caught the sense  
Of life with high auroras and the flow  
Of wide majestic spaces;  
Of light abundant; and of keen impassioned faces,  
Transfigured underneath its vivid glow. (213)

Again, the speaker professes to “know” very little, but it is remarkable how much information about the afterlife he is able to pass on to the readers, considering that he “could not see.” As Pratt clarified for Deacon, “I never see inside the door. I only judge by the reflection on the faces of human beings and by certain sounds which intermittently break through that there are vast stretches beyond” (Letter to Deacon, 27 Aug. 1927). Regardless, the speaker’s inability to communicate this mystical experience using more specific language hearkens back to the problem of theophany—of representing the divine—that he wrestles with in his doctoral thesis on Paul (Gingell, *Pursuits* xix).

Like Paul, whose conversion on the road to Damascus blinded him temporarily, the speaker of *The Iron Door* is also left with his “sight enfeebled by the solar glare” (213), and indeed, the closing vision teems with light imagery with biblical as well as mystical connotations: in *Studies in Pauline Eschatology*, Pratt writes how “light and fire are [God’s] ‘manifestations,’ the effects of his power” which, along with other

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50. McAuliffe gives examples from *The Iron Door* of each of the “four marks” of mystical religious experiences (172), which include: “ineffability,” a “noetic quality,”

manifestations, “are invariably the symbols to illustrate the unapproachable presence of God” (108-109); and in his lectures on “Conversion,” James refers to the “frequency” of “hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory luminous phenomena, *photisms*” in conversion narratives, adding that “Saint Paul’s blinding heavenly vision seems to have been a phenomenon of this sort; so does Constantine’s cross in the sky” (*Varieties* 251-52; emphasis in original). Versions of both of these phenomena reappear in Pratt’s poetry,<sup>51</sup> and in *The Iron Door* they manifest as “passing gleams” (204), mere reflections of “transitory light” (206). In this dream landscape, everything is evanescent, in flux, but these photisms are nevertheless signs of a supernatural revelation having “no origin in earthly light” (204). The result of this revelation is not, as Clark maintains, “a complete rejection of any religious belief” (82), nor is it the secular and generalized “belief” that Buitenhuis suggests “can transform life and give even the sceptical earth-bound mind a vision of beauty and meaning” (qtd. in Clark 81); instead, the result is the speaker’s mystical “sense” of a higher power—an epiphany whose significance survives “the meaning of the hour” (213) but whose precise meaning cannot be translated from the private, oneiric context of the original vision to the public context of the poem. For James, this kind of ineffability is one of the crucial “four marks” of a mystical religious experience (*Varieties* 380), whether that experience be Christian, Sufist, or simply the result of “nitrous oxide intoxication” (387).

One of the varieties of religious experience in which James and Pratt shared a common interest was spirit communication or spiritualism, though Pratt generally

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“transiency,” and “passivity” (James, *Varieties* 380-81).

51. See, for example, Brébeuf’s vision of “a moving cross that “Advanced along the sky until its arms / Cast shadows on the Huron territory, / ‘And huge enough to crucify us all’” (*Brébeuf* 80), or the passage just quoted from *The Iron Door* (213).

avoided advertising this fact. Conversely, James was a visible member of such esoteric groups as the Theosophical Society, the Metaphysical Club, and a founding member of the American Society for Psychical Research. While it is true that James remained wary of contemporary scientific “proofs” of “spirit-return,” he conceded that he was “somewhat impressed by [the] favorable conclusions” of the prominent psychical researchers of his time (*Varieties* 524). As well, James’s framing of psychic or paranormal events in terms of religious experience was not unusual at the turn of the century—even though, according to Leon Surette, spiritualism “communicates exclusively with deceased humans and with neither gods nor demons” (24). As Stan McMullin argues in *Anatomy of a Seance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada*, spiritualism may not have facilitated conversion with “gods,” but it was seen “both as a religious exercise and as a scientific endeavour, [growing] out of the nineteenth-century dialogue between science and religion” (xvi). However, like James, McMullin elects to continue rather than close off this dialogue, and he dismisses those critics who would treat spiritualism exclusively from either a scientific or a religious perspective (3).

In *fin-de-siècle* Canada, the emergence of spiritualist, occult, and theosophist publications—such as those catalogued in Dean Irvine’s survey of “‘Little Magazines’ in English Canada” (604)—corresponds not only to this ongoing dialogue between science and religion,<sup>52</sup> but also to the post-war popularity of spiritualism, of which Jenny O’Hara Pincock’s founding of the Church of Divine Revelation in St. Catharines (with her sister

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52. A further example of this dialogue is supplied by Betts: “historians Ramsay Cook and A.B. McKillop have demonstrated that Victorian Canada was troubled over the implications of Darwinian evolution and hungered for a reconciliation between science

Minnie O'Hara Maines and Minnie's husband, the Methodist minister Fred Maines), serves as one of the more noteworthy examples. Both in Canada and abroad, spiritualism generated tremendous interest after the First World War: in 1916, Sir Oliver Lodge gave spiritualism "a good deal of credibility" with *Raymond, or Life and Death* (McMullin 108), offering it as a balm to those who had lost loved ones in the war; and in 1918, the Methodist Dr. Albert Durrant Watson's *The Twentieth Plane: A Psychic Revelation* "became an overnight sensation in Toronto and across Canada" (McMullin 109), building on a foundation laid by Canadian psychologist Richard Maurice Bucke's influential *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901), which unveils what Betts refers to as Bucke's "r/evolutionary theory" (*Avant-Garde* 87).<sup>53</sup> Ontario, then, was the site of at least three major hubs of spiritualist activity: Bucke lived in London and in turn influenced Flora MacDonald Denison, whose Bon Echo Inn (near Napanee) became a spiritualist retreat as well as the home for Denison's Whitman-centric little magazine, *The Sunset of Bon Echo* (Betts, *Avant-Garde* 96-97),<sup>54</sup> and Pincock held séances in her St. Catharines home with the American medium William Cartheuser.

But it was Toronto that would increasingly become Canada's spiritualist, occult, and theosophist nerve centre, and Betts tells us that in the 1920s "Toronto's r/evolutionary mysticism reached a fevered pitch during the middle years of the decade" (*Avant-Garde* 105). Like many of Betts's "Cosmic Canadians" involved in the Arts and Letters Club or the Toronto art scene more generally—such as W.W.E. Ross (who also

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and religion. [Richard Maurice] Bucke's theories offered just such a bridge over the developing antagonism and conflict" (*Avant-Garde* 89).

53. See McMullin (86) for more on Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*. As Betts notes (*Avant-Garde* 89), James also praised this book, and he quotes Bucke at length in *Varieties* (398-99).

attended séances with Pincock), Bertram Brooker, Lawren Harris, and Fred Varley (Pratt's friend and sometime illustrator)—Pratt's formational mystical experiences took place around this time and in this same cultural context. Pitt describes, for example, how Pratt entertained the idea of attending a séance throughout the 1920s while reading popular spiritualist books that had been recommended to him by Pincock, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The New Revelation* and *The Vital Message*, Gustave Geley's *From the Unconscious to the Conscious*, and Dennis Bradley's *Towards the Stars* and *The Wisdom of the Gods* (Master 8-10).<sup>55</sup> While it is possible to examine Pratt's spiritualist poems in isolation, or as oddities in a more or less straightforward Christian oeuvre, the mystical contexts mapped out by critics such as Pitt, Betts, and McMullin elucidate some of the surprising similarities between Pratt's poetry and that of his "Cosmic" contemporaries. Yet, admittedly, Pratt's religious awakening produced spiritual and poetic fruits of a different kind: as we will see, Pratt's own awakening, heralded in poems such as *The Iron Door* and "An Awakening" (published five months before his first séance), took on distinctly Christian tones, unlike the seemingly monist vision presented in Brooker's 1929 "essay-cum-manifesto," "When We Awake!" (Betts, *Avant-Garde* 123).

Pratt's transformative séance experience took place in Pincock's St. Catharines residence on 11 September 1928. The results of this sitting, which lasted more than three

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54. See also Irvine, *Editing* (185-86) and "Little Magazines" (607-608). Ontario's importance as a locus of spiritualist activity has also been documented by McMullin.

55. Cf. Pincock (66). McAuliffe never follows up on Pitt's biographical promptings in this direction, and her endnote about "Pratt's interest in spiritualism after the writing of *The Iron Door*" (214) is misleading at best: Pratt became interested in spiritualism through his wife Viola's brother, Hagar Whitney, with whom "Pratt had many conversations on the subject" in "the early 1920s," and through the Pincocks, from 1925 on (Pitt, *Master* 9)—that is, long before he wrote *The Iron Door*.



hours, were recorded in *The Trails of Truth* (1930), both by Pincock and by Viola Pratt, with the latter's observations included in a write-up entitled "Account of This Seance under Mrs. X's Pen." The Pratts appear throughout Pincock's book as "Dr. and Mrs. X.": indeed, as the list of "Witnesses to Events Recorded in This Book" attests, they "are the only two witnesses for whom pseudo-initials have been substituted" (n. pag.)—ostensibly because, as readers are later informed, "Dr. X., who is a well-known authority in Psychology and Philosophy, deems it advisable to remain incognito" (67). In the preamble to her summary of the first Pratt séance, however, Pincock maintains that "These two sitters were intelligently sympathetic" (66). Whatever the case, shortly after the séance began, the spirit of Robert Newton Pincock—Pincock's recently deceased husband and Pratt's long-time Newfoundland friend—is said to have greeted Pratt with "Codfish!" (68), a Newfoundland shibboleth of sorts. During the remainder of the sitting, further manifestations occurred, including the sudden appearance of the floating, disembodied hand of Pratt's mother, which, according to Viola, "took his pencil" (77). But none of these bizarre events seem to have been more meaningful or persuasive to Pratt than a short exchange with the spirit of his mother, which Pincock relates as follows:

Dr. X: Is mother there?

Spirit Voice: Yes, my boy.

Dr. X: Hello Old Socks!

I sensed that Dr. X. had demanded some evidential reply. The spirit, with emotion, cried, "Hello, Old Boots!"

Dr. X: "Mother, that is just what I wanted. That was wonderful." (68)

According to Pincock, Pratt then “explained that this was one point he had privately decided should be the great test, should a voice manifest, purporting to be his mother. It had, he said, been their usual morning greeting. It carried great conviction” (68).<sup>56</sup> Even Dr. Anderson, the “magnificent soul” whom Pincock introduces as “an invisible, spirit-teacher of the human instrument” (30), pronounces Pratt’s experience a success: “this is a great revelation. It changes your thoughts, and gives a broader and wider understanding of the reality of life. It takes away all fear of death and the horror of the grave. It proves the teachings of Christ, ‘In my Father’s house are many Mansions.’ Of course it does *not* prove a hell or damnation, for there is no such thing” (74; emphasis in original). Interestingly, while Dr. Anderson’s enigmatic reference to John 14.2 receives no further comment, one might observe that his statement about hell does not emerge out of thin air, but actually corresponds with the more progressive theological views of Canadian Methodists such as James Henderson, who “rejected the idea of a ‘material hell’” (Airhart, *Serving* 118).<sup>57</sup>

Dr. Anderson’s confident claims about the significance of this séance are corroborated by Viola as well as by several of Pratt’s “intimate friends” (Pitt, *Master* 52). McMullin seems to be mistaken, then, when he posits that “It does not appear that Pratt became a consistent ‘sitter’ and there is no evidence he accepted spiritualism” (131). Both of these claims can be contested: as Pitt points out, Pratt sat at multiple séances in St. Catharines as well as in Toronto—both in “the Pratts’ own living room” and, later, “at the home of Ellen Elliott” (*Master* 49); in addition, he showed a continued interest in, if

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56. Viola’s account of the same event confirms that this peculiar greeting was “the test Dr. X. exacted for belief” (76). For other accounts of this séance, see McMullin (135-38) and Pitt (*Master* 46-49).

not “acceptance” of, spiritualism, as his private disclosures to G. Wilson Knight and Margaret Furness MacLeod in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrate (Pitt, *Master* 115, 52). Although his refusal to discuss such interests in public forums makes the exact nature of his relationship to spiritualism difficult to discern, Pitt is adamant that Pratt accepted the proofs of an afterlife that his first séance experience provided:

There can be doubt that, whatever the source of the “voices” may have been, this, indeed, was what the “sitters” witnessed that day. Nor can there be any doubt that Pratt was convinced that what he heard and saw was all it purported to be. For him, moreover, it was, as Viola has said and subsequent letters of his own confirm, the final “clench of evidence” [*Iron Door* (209)] of human immortality and of the spiritual basis of the cosmic order. (*Master* 49)

As the vagueness of this passage illustrates, Pratt’s convictions could be said to align him with multiple religious ideologies, all of which affirm “human immortality”: Pitt’s “cosmic order,” for example, is reminiscent of the language employed by Bucke and other of Betts’s “Cosmic Canadians.” Yet the “spiritual basis” of Pratt’s personal religion would be articulated more precisely elsewhere—by Pratt and Pitt—in Christian and Jamesian terms, respectively. In a 1938 letter to Ina McCauley, for example, Pratt is uncharacteristically candid, remarking, “I had written a poem on my mother’s passing in *The Iron Door* to get some relief to my bewilderment, which I received because I have an ineradicable belief that we never die except only in the sense of physical dissolution. That belief has grown every year for it is unthinkable to me that Christ had his end on the Cross” (Letter, 2 May 1938). Referring more explicitly to spiritualism as the vehicle

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57. See also McMullin (160) or James, who comments on this kind of liberalism more generally (*Varieties* 91, 517).

through which Pratt “received” his “ineradicable belief,” Pitt seems to unwittingly adopt the language of Jamesian pragmatism when he asserts that, “for Pratt and his wife, Jenny Pincock’s séances *had served their purpose*. The question of human immortality was for them no longer one that raised any doubts” (*Master* 49; emphasis added).

Still, the Jamesian implications of Pratt’s spiritualism run even deeper: in *Varieties*, James avers that we “build out our religion in the way most congruous with our personal susceptibilities. Among these susceptibilities intellectual ones play a decisive part” (514-15). Examining Pratt’s first séance as a kind of Jamesian conversion, one could contend that he was especially emotionally and intellectually susceptible to the idea of human immortality in 1928, and this over-belief—pre-figured in *The Iron Door*—made the encounter with his mother’s spirit possible; his paranormal encounter confirmed what he already wanted to believe, providing what James labels the “positive content of religious experience” (515).

As Pratt’s remarkable letter to McCauley implies, though, his spiritualist conversion should not be read as a conversion away from Christianity. In fact, the incident seems to have had rather the opposite effect: Pitt writes of “Viola’s view that but for his restored ‘faith in Christian fundamentals’ clenched by the evidence of his 1928 psychic experiences he could not have ‘given up *months* of his life labouring to write an explicitly Christian epic – *Brébeuf and His Brethren*” (*Master* 51; emphasis in original). For Pratt as for other Canadians, spiritualism was paradoxically regarded as forming (to quote Dr. Anderson) “the bulwark of Christianity,” “the rock-bottom foundation of the early Christian church itself” (Pincock 154). In other words, Canadian spiritualism was an intentionally syncretistic blend of faith traditions—and this mixed model could be

traced back to mid-nineteenth-century precedents such as Susanna and Dunbar Moodie (McMullin 140). One reason for this kind of active syncretism is suggested by McMullin's classification of spiritualism as primarily a "practical" rather than "philosophical" religion (xii, xv);<sup>58</sup> it was typically open and fluid, lacking the fixed doctrines, systematic theology, or organizational trappings of many institutional religions. However, while "a large majority of followers of spirit communication practised it outside of formal congregations" (McMullin xv), prior to the "third disestablishment" of religion in North America (Hammond 5) and the supposed end of Christendom in Canada in 1965 (Grant 216), many of these spiritualists remained active members of "formal" Christian congregations.

It should also be noted that the inclusion of Christian elements in the Pincocks' séances was not unusual, historically speaking. In a 1927 letter addressed to "Dear Everybody," Pincock, by way of partial explanation, proposes that séances "should start with the Lord's prayer & 23rd psalm. That gets *good spirit* vibrations, for sad to say, there are evil ones also" (qtd. in McMullin 130; emphasis in original)<sup>59</sup>—and Viola's published account of their 11 September séance confirms, "We began by repeating in unison the Lord's Prayer, and the Twenty-third psalm, and then we sang [hymns], Mrs. Pincock playing the piano for us" (76). B.F. Austin's foreword to *The Trails of Truth* also performs a superficially inexplicable merger of Christianity, spiritualism, and even

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58. Spiritualism is discussed in McMullin—via "[Dan] Yoder, with reference to E.R. Leach's *Dialectic in Practical Religion* (1968)" (xii)—as a practical religion, "a religion of the people" characterized by "Its lack of hierarchy and its essential democracy, which gave all sitters equal access to the spirit world through the medium" (xv).

59. As McMullin indicates, Pincock borrowed the guidelines for her séances "from the commentary of a spirit guide called Margie Duncan, who had died at the age of fourteen, and from articles in *Light* magazine from England" (130).

Jamesian anti-materialism,<sup>60</sup> tracing the Christian roots of spiritualism back to the Resurrection of Christ and to Pentecost. However, in doing so, Austin frames spiritualism as an enlargement of Christianity and as the unacknowledged guardian of the mystical truths it contains, writing of the central spiritualist truth about the immortality of the human spirit as “fundamental to any system of religion or morality,” not as inimical to institutional religion. In this regard, Austin’s spiritualist beliefs sound in unison with those of Conan Doyle—whose fiction Pratt relished<sup>61</sup>—who proclaims in *The New Revelation* that spiritualism “*is* religion—the very essence of it”; it is “the great unifying force, the one provable thing connected with every religion, Christian or non-Christian, forming the common solid basis upon which each raises, if it must needs raise, that separate system which appeals to the varied types of mind” (51-52; emphasis in original).

Nevertheless, the tensions between spiritualism and Christianity could not be dissolved as effortlessly in reality as in such utopian discourse: “it must be admitted,” Conan Doyle continues, “that an acceptance of the teaching brought to us from beyond would deeply modify conventional Christianity” (53). Still, Conan Doyle and many other apologists for spiritualism were concerned not with discrediting Christianity, but with revolutionizing it from within. As McMullin points out, a precedent for such “modifications” (Conan Doyle 53) or for Christian-spiritualist syncretisms had already been established in Canada by “people like Susanna and John Moodie, Alexander McLachlan, and Catherine Parr Traill,” who “were striving to place the communications

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60. See, for example, Austin’s Jamesian declaration that “Men must be awakened from practical materialism by testimony and personal experiences.”

61. See Pitt, *Truant* (294-95). Conan Doyle’s fiction in particular seems to have influenced Pratt’s poetry in ways that have not been fully explored. The two certainly shared many interests in common, as Jørgen Riber Christensen’s essay on Conan Doyle’s

of the seance room within a Christian context” (15-16). Furthermore, some of Pincock’s and other spiritualists’ values were very much in line with those of the more progressive members of the United Church of Canada. As McMullin explains, for example, “Spiritualism stressed equality and improvement for both men and women. Hell became an obsolete conception as all aspired to higher levels of awareness both on this side and the other side of the veil. Drawing upon the trappings of the United Church, these people strove to modernize old, established religious beliefs” (160). Yet the correspondence or blending of Christian and spiritualist beliefs in no way guaranteed the widespread acceptance of spiritualism. As Luther H. Martin and Anita Maria Leopold have argued, syncretistic adaptations—even those “embraced by participants in a particular religion as an intentional strategy of historical adaptation or social inclusivity”—“are more often resisted as inappropriate or corrupting influences” (93). While Austin and Pincock may not have been alone in their understanding of spiritualism as the apotheosis of an essentially Christian religious tradition, the fact that Austin’s spiritualist beliefs led to his expulsion from the Methodist church<sup>62</sup> suggests that, at least in 1899, not all Canadians were comfortable with this attempted harmonization.

Although Pratt would not follow Pincock and Austin in publicly advocating the union of Christianity and spiritualism, his post-conversion poetry deploys religious imagery that belongs exclusively to neither tradition: for instance, in “Old Age,” a short lyric first published in the *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* shortly after his first séance, the iron door has become an “open door” (10). This image, evocative of Revelation 4.1—in which “a door was opened in heaven”—is also “common in classical

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atavistic and spiritualist concerns in *The Lost World* (1912) and *The Land of Mist* (1926), respectively, would suggest.

writings, mysticism, Gnosticism, and later Judaism” (Jeremias 341). As well, phrases such as “I knew” (13) announce Pratt’s newfound conviction as well as his continued inability to comprehend, through pure reason, the “high trick of sight and hearing” (13) that gives him a glimpse of an afterlife “where the valley mists were clearing, / And silver horns were blowing on the hills” (15-16). As in “The Mystic,” a sonnet published in *The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems* (1937) but originally titled “Credo Quia Non Intellego” (“I believe what I do not understand”), Pratt’s Jamesian Fideism is still operative here. And in “The Weather Glass,” another poem from *The Fable of the Goats*, light imagery is again associated (as in *The Iron Door*) with a vaguely messianic presence that dispels both darkness and death—although in “Niemoeller,” a poem written in the 1940s, Pratt’s association of Christ and “incandescence” becomes explicit (8-9).

It is in another post-conversion poem, however, that Pratt conveys his apparent belief in another Jamesian axiom: the failure of language to adequately capture mystical religious experiences. “The Inexpressible,” an unpublished Petrarchan sonnet written in 1933, not only echoes Pratt’s “The Toll of the Bells” (1918), in which language and liturgy fail society in the midst of its grieving, but also prefigures a similar preoccupation with language and loss embodied in later poems such as “Silences” (1936) and “The Nativity” (1949). While “The Inexpressible” was not published in Pratt’s lifetime and is not mentioned by McAuliffe, he thought highly enough of it to send it to F.R. Scott for inclusion in *New Provinces*, a modernist anthology that was for “several months” Pratt’s “chief enthusiasm and diversion” (Pitt, *Master* 143).<sup>63</sup> The poem’s octave introduces the problem: “words and looks and gestures are a mould / Too frail to stand the casting of a

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62. See, for example, McMullin (42, 50-55).

63. See, for example, Pratt (Letter to Scott, 9 Jan. 1934) and Pitt (*Master* 132, 146).



name” (5-8). Language, like that of Pratt’s sonnet, conforms to a “mould,” failing to truly capture that which it represents. In “Silence in the Sea,” the inaugural Pratt Lecture at Memorial University, Frye chronicles this problem in terms of the tension between oral and written cultures. Significantly, this tension, which can be articulated in Prattian terms as a tension between the hyper-rational world of the “temple” and the pre-literate “cave” (“From Stone to Steel” 13), could also be said to lie at the heart of James’s distinction between personal and institutional religion since, according to Frye, one of the essential changes that occurs during the transition from an oral to a writing culture is the calcification of visceral, transcendental religious experiences: “In a writing culture, philosophy develops from proverb and oracle into systematic concept and logical argument; religion develops from mythology into theology; magic fades out and is absorbed into science” (“Silence” 388). This change is analogous to the kind of degeneration that, in James’s view, attends the transformation of personal into institutional religions: when religious experience is communicated, it is debased.<sup>64</sup> In essence, this is the problem that Pratt works through in the sestet of “The Inexpressible”:

Therefore, let not these holy vows be scarred  
By flint of speech, by priests put on parade  
Before stone altar-steps, witnessed and marred  
By oath, but given under an accolade  
Of night with its unuttered language starred  
Against a deep Uranian facade. (9-14).

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64. Taylor provides a useful summary of this process of debasement as it is described in *Varieties*, and he points out that Max Weber, drawing on Adolf von Harnack, also shows how “Charismatic interventions in history suffer unavoidably from ‘banalization’ (‘Veralltäglichung,’ usually translated ‘routinization’)” (*Varieties of Religion* 19).

As a response to the problem of the inadequacy of language and of institutional religion—two problems which Pratt yokes together with his loaded references to “holy vows” (of marriage? of lovers?) being “scarred / By flint of speech” or “marred / By oath”—Pratt decides to celebrate, and thus to recoup, what Frye calls “magic.”

Like earlier poems, too, “The Inexpressible” highlights the fact that one cannot know everything, but it does so while adding a quasi-spiritualist twist: here, Pratt embraces the “unuttered language” of night and the possibilities yielded by what, in a 1936 talk on “The Outlook for Poetry,” he refers to as “a fresh release of poetic energy from mystical sources” (236). These “mystical sources” do not necessarily fill in the gaps in human knowledge so much as remind us “how tremendously vital to literature is the vast penumbra outside, the half-tones, the guesses, the shadows, the gropings in a world but dimly realized” (“Outlook” 236-37). What is more, the process of translating one’s mystical religious experiences into writing—and the concomitant Jamesian shift from personal to institutional, codified religions—can be reversed; they need not cohere inexorably into formulaic mythologies drained of all vitality or mystery. Instead, as is suggested by Frye’s contention (quoted earlier) that “Christianity has always been both a revolutionary and an institutionalized religion” (“Silence” 392), there is an ongoing struggle between the personal and the institutional, between private experiences and the public utterances that attempt to make them comprehensible to society at large. But this “revolutionary” process, which is one of constant dissolution and reformation, shapes religions other than Christianity: it also affects the syncretistic spiritualism touted by many Canadians in the 1920s and 1930s. As Pincock argues in *Trails of Truth*, “Heretics of today may become the Joans of Arc tomorrow. Who can tell? . . . For the battle

between the ‘divine-discontent’ of creative mind (or scientific research—call it what you will), and the orthodox views of the staid and respectable is still waging” (15). This brand of spiritualism, like the ever-changing Christian foundation upon which it appears to rest and of which Pratt wrote in his graduate theses, is equally vulnerable to the cycles of religious revolution that redefine orthodoxy and foreground its contingent nature.

Given the significance of Pratt’s encounter with spiritualism and its influence on his poetry, his unwillingness to freely discuss his séance experiences warrants further critical consideration. According to Djwa and R.G. Moyles, “Viola Pratt’s recollection is that she and her husband ceased to attend séances because of their perception of ‘a sense of evil’” (xlvii). But in his 21 May 1954 letter to Sutherland regarding his first séance, Pratt gives other justifications for his reticence: “I should prefer not to have it mentioned as there was so much doubt about its authenticity, and I didn’t follow up the ‘meetings’” (Letter, 21 May 1954). Note, however, that Pratt does not admit to doubting the authenticity of the séance. And, typically for Pratt, this autobiographical statement is actually quite misleading: as Pitt and McMullin both observe, there were more séances after the initial one in September 1928, and the “doubt about its authenticity” was not his own (Pitt, *Master* 46-50; McMullin 139). Finally, Pitt gives yet another explanation of why the Pratts may have distanced themselves from spiritualism: “Later a few of their closest Toronto friends were invited to attend [séances hosted at their home], but most of them proved to be hardened sceptics, and the atmosphere of faith and acceptance was no longer present” (*Master* 49). The success of such séances was dependent, it would seem,

on the over-belief and cooperation of its sitters.<sup>65</sup> A more compelling reason for Pratt's silence on the topic of spiritualism, though, is that "the more conservative nature of the established churches in Canada made public support of spiritualism somewhat dangerous" (McMullin 222).<sup>66</sup> The stories of Austin, Albert Durrant Watson, and Fred Maines, as told in McMullin's study, serve as powerful examples of how spiritualism was not widely accepted in Canadian society, and—more reasonably—not seen as compatible with Christianity: for instance, while Austin could be considered theologically modernist insofar as he did not believe in biblical inerrancy, he goes further than the modernists by rejecting the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (McMullin 58-59).

Pratt's close ties to the Methodist and then United Church, which in turn had close ties with the printing presses and media that controlled cultural production in Canada, supply another potential answer to the question of why Pratt, an ambitious and savvy poet, took steps to conceal his spiritualist convictions from all but his closest friends. Through his friendship with Lorne Pierce and his business relationship with Ryerson Press, Pratt was ideally situated to observe the modernisms emergent in both Canadian religion and literature, and it is possible that, as an active participant in each, he considered these two modernisms not as totally discrete phenomena, but as inextricably linked developments that could be understood against a shared backdrop of cultural and intellectual crises. While it would be a mistake to confuse the two, it would be a greater mistake to ignore the ways in which the histories of Christian and cultural modernisms are inextricably linked, to overlook the fact "that the very idea of an epochal cultural

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65. Cf. McMullin (xiv). Similarly, in Pincock's letter to "Dear Everybody," she says that "Adverse Vibrations ruin a sitting. [ill health and bad thinking, doubt and criticism]" (qtd. in McMullin 130).

66. Cf. Pitt (*Master* 50).

transformation at this time would necessarily involve some confrontation with the still-dominant religion and cultural paradigm of the West” (Tonning 2). Indeed, the same “Canadian media, public, and state apparatus” Betts identifies as having “sabotaged” avant-garde artists in and around 1927 (*Avant-Garde* 8), the year Toronto hosted the International Exhibition of Modern Art, is similarly responsible for having curbed open discussion of spiritualism at a time when Pratt and many leading literary, religious, and political figures seem to have been dabbling in the occult. In the 1920s and 1930s in English-speaking Canada, the state apparatus, major media outlets, and many colleges and universities were still linked to the (mostly Protestant) Church in various ways: the Methodist and United Churches were bound up in Canadian cultural production through Ryerson, for example, and through educational institutions such as Victoria University. Canada had not yet moved towards what Taylor calls “the post-Durkheimian age,” a time in which “many people are uncomprehending in face of the demand to conform” (*Varieties of Religion* 101). Instead, the interconnectedness of church and state, or of the Christian faith with prevailing notions of middle-class respectability, was still a reality in the 1940s, as is evinced by a greeting included in a limited edition of Pratt’s war poem *Dunkirk* (1941): in this message, J.G. Johnston, R.G. Everson, and J.L. Charlesworth write that “*The Christmas ideal of / peace on earth may still / be far away, but we are thankful that faith persists, / that the British Commonwealth of Nations is / united in a cause vital to freemen and, above all, / that the island fortress will withstand every attack*” (qtd. in Laakso 407; emphasis in original). Reinforcing Pratt’s poetic rendering of the Allies’ retreat, this message makes it clear that the bonds between church and state were still very much intact in Canada during the Second World War.

As further justification for Pratt's silence on the matter of his spiritualist conversion and subsequent convictions, one could cite his continued ecclesiastical ties and Viola's job security as a long-time employee of the United Church Publishing House (which shared offices with Ryerson and the United Church of Canada)—not to mention their respective reputations as members of high standing in many Toronto clubs and organizations populated by other prominent members of the church. Pratt seems to have felt too constrained by his ties to the Methodist and United Church—or perhaps more accurately, certain conservative members of those churches—either to discuss spiritualism publicly or to speak out more directly and forcefully against extant puritanical strains in Canadian religion and culture, as Douglas Bush had done in “A Plea for Original Sin.”<sup>67</sup> This was a sharply satirical piece which influenced Pratt's carnivalesque poem *The Witches' Brew* (1925) but “was not an essay he himself would have published” (Pitt, *Truant* 219). As a matter of fact, Pratt's correspondence reveals him to be the very kind of person Dr. Anderson intended to single out when he berates those “who, though convinced by the wonderful revelations in these sittings, though thoroughly satisfied by the evidence they had received, were still—for business reasons—afraid of publicity” (Pincock 154). While Pratt was playfully irreverent in his private correspondence with friends and family,<sup>68</sup> he also kept a close eye on how his

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67. In this essay, Bush takes aim at Canadian literature's puritanism, arguing that “Canada is too moral” (589) and—playing on Martin Luther's famous but frequently misinterpreted injunction to “sin boldly” (Hendrix 121)—invited Canadians to “sin gladly” (590).

68. For examples of Pratt's playful irreverence in his correspondence, see, for example, his letters to: Lorne Pierce (16 May 1923; 1 Dec. 1923); William Arthur Deacon (19 June 1923); William Rose Bénét ([17] Apr. 1945); Arthur Phelps (2 Jan. 1952); and Claire Pratt ([27 June 1954]).

poetry's content would affect sales.<sup>69</sup> The censorship of at least three of his poems<sup>70</sup> had given him first-hand experience of the ways that "ecclesiastical affiliations" (Pratt, Letter to Pierce, 18 Dec. 1924) could place limits on one's freedom of expression.

Was Pratt's poetry impacted by his encounter with spiritualism? Absolutely. But was Pratt a "Cosmic Canadian," to use Betts's term? Not at all. As we have seen, Pratt did not share his avant-gardist contemporaries' belief in a cosmic "r/evolution," nor does his writing exhibit the same universalist and monist tendencies as Bucke's "r/evolutionary theory," in which "all religions would become one" (Betts, *Avant-Garde* 88), or Brooker's "gospel," which was predicated on the idea that "Opposites do not exist" (qtd. in Betts, *Avant-Garde* 119). Instead, any potentially "r/evolutionary" aspects of Pratt's poetry spring from his cautious but topical re-writings of Christian theology in relation to, but occasionally against, its strictly institutional, orthodox, or even written forms. If Betts is alluding to his Cosmic Canadians when he refers to "the poetry of this mystical movement" (*Avant-Garde* 134), he is surely mistaken in his appropriation of Pratt's *The Iron Door* to such a tradition, even if he does so merely to cite the poem as representative of a "less formally adventurous" (134) and less "sophisticated" current

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69. See, for example, Pratt (Letter to Smith, 7 Dec. 1942).

70. Pratt's censored poems include *The Witches' Brew*, "A Dialogue by a Stream" (later "Overheard by a Stream"), which contained the word "damn" and was therefore revised for publication with Ryerson (Pitt, *Truant* 170-71), and "The Depression Ends," whose fart episode reeked too much of impropriety to "certain fastidious readers" (Pitt, *Master* 110; cf. Pratt, Letter to Smith, 7 Dec. 1942). For more on censorship and the puritanical prohibitions of Newfoundland and Canadian Methodists, including Lorne Pierce, see, for example, Campbell, Pitt (*Truant* 285-87); and McAuliffe (7). Pitt, explaining that Pierce wrote to Pratt and suggested he publish *The Witches' Brew* anonymously, maintains that "*The Brew* was clearly not a poetic offspring he [Pierce] wished to see publicly acknowledged by a Ryerson author" (*Truant* 285). But discomfort with this poem—or at least its reception and possible repercussions in Pratt's professional and private life—was apparently mutual: much later, in a letter to Sutherland, Pratt confided, "I am still a bit nervous about its subject matter" (Letter, 21 May 1954).

within it (135). As I demonstrated above, Pratt's encounter with spiritualism may have caused him to move further away from the fundamentalist Methodism of his childhood, but this move did not result in a clean break from Christianity. In the end, McAuliffe may be right to conclude that Pratt's is essentially an orthodox Christianity; yet if future critics continue to discuss his faith along similar lines, they must do so while acknowledging the paradoxical role that unorthodox religious experiences played in the development and reinforcement of such an orthodoxy.

#### **2.4 BEYOND THE TEMPLE AND THE CAVE: MESSIANIC MEDIATIONS OF THE PERSONAL AND THE INSTITUTIONAL**

“To know the best in the history of literature and life and to make that best prevail may be regarded as a classical rendering of the Christian faith. All the elements which give meaning to life are implicit in that faith. The realist, the stoic, the prophet might at the end of their climb find common ground. The desperate cruelty of existence may be seen in the lament over Jerusalem and that cry of abandonment on the cross, but with that was his belief in love human and divine stubbornly held, sublimely contrasted with the ignorance of his enemies. It is a hard faith as everyone knows who has tried to maintain it when failure, suffering, and death crawl like shadows over the hopes.”  
(Pratt, “In Quest” 284)

Pratt believed in the pragmatic social applications of poetry: poetry should not be stripped, as he thought it was in “schools like Dadaism and Surrealism,” “of all social value and social function” (“Meaning” 252-53). “It is very hard,” he argues, “to see the value of any artistic medium which is utterly contemptuous of communication” (262). But Pratt's poetry also evinces his belief in the pragmatic social applications of religion. Consequently, in his 1930s and 1940s poetry especially, as he took on a more involved role in the Canadian literary scene as editor of *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, Pratt seems to depart somewhat from James, whose notion of personal religion in *Varieties* fails to



address at length the social repercussions of private religious experiences. Through his religious epic *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940), for example, Pratt explores the tangible, long-lasting effects of individual religious convictions as they are communicated and translated into heroic deeds. It was in his late lyric poetry from the years during and immediately following the Second World War, though, that Pratt would give some of his most definitive statements of faith—even if these are encoded in a religious symbolism that has yielded a wide range of interpretations from his many interlocutors. In light of Pratt’s theologically modernist, Jamesian, and spiritualist influences, I would argue that, while Pratt was still wary of institutional religion’s fixed doctrines and codified rituals, he moves beyond the mystic’s or ascetic’s cave and the closed circle of the spiritualist séance, beyond sequestered forms of personal religion, to celebrate Christ and those figures whose Christ-like sacrifices impact others and thus resonate throughout history. But Pratt’s Christ is not only a human being whose sacrificial heroism should be imitated, nor merely a Jamesian or humanist exemplar of virtues such as heroism and free will; Pratt’s Christ is the God of Christianity, the fixed anchor to which his shifting and complex personal religion remains tethered. By focusing on Christ and Christian martyrs such as Brébeuf, Pratt strives to occupy the middle ground between the temple of institutional religion and the cave of personal religion, combining the strengths and rejecting the weaknesses of each.

As in “The Highway” (1931), a poem whose dense mystical symbolism is reminiscent of W.B. Yeats’s early lyrics, the emphasis in “From Stone to Steel” (1932) is on a processual theology, on a progressivist, evolutionary journey halted by atavistic violence or what Robert Burns called “Man’s inhumanity to man” (186). Humanity

collectively disrupts the teleology of Christ's sacrifice: in "The Highway," humanity steps off "the road" (19) that leads to Christ and therefore seemingly outside of the Christian eschatological scheme, yet it is still within reach of God's "hand" (22); it is frozen in space and time, occupying a liminal site of latent possibility and choice that Pratt, using a compound noun, succinctly refers to as "our so brief a span" (21). Similarly, "From Stone to Steel" concludes with the image of Gethsemane (20), which Pratt frequently invokes as a symbol both of Jamesian free will but also of religious indeterminacy.<sup>71</sup> Pratt writes, "Between the temple and the cave / The boundary lies tissue thin" (13-14)—but neither the cave nor the temple are appealing destinations: the cave is associated here with an atavistic "snarl Neanderthal" (5), and the temple's civilized façade is stripped away to reveal personified "altars [that] crave" bloody sacrifices "As satisfaction for a sin" (15-16). While Pacey generalizes from this poem that the "ever-seeking pilgrim" of Pratt's poetry is on a quest "from the barbaric cave" towards the utopia of a "divine temple" (*Creative* 134), such an idealized temple should not be conflated with the flawed structure figured here, nor should the sacrifices that its altars crave be confused with Christ's sacrifice: this is a rationalized bloodlust divorced from soteriology, and thus, like many of Pratt's poems, "From Stone to Steel" could be said to perform a moral critique of the human perversion of reason.<sup>72</sup> Further, the dissolution of the "boundary" separating "the temple and the cave" means the dissolution of the idea of progress and civilization upon which Christendom has been built. However,

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71. See, for example, "Cycles" (36) and "The Truant" (131).

72. The editors of *E.J. Pratt: Complete Poems* hint at the possible reasons behind this particular critique when they write that the reference to Geneva in the poem "reflects both the Geneva Conventions of 1929, which stipulated conditions governing treatment of prisoners of war, and the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932" (1: 393; cf. Pitt, *Master* 97).

Christ and Christ's ability to navigate Gethsemane seem to offer us a way out of our current plight, even if the salvation promised by such symbols is deferred within the context of the poem. Through the images of Gethsemane and an undulating, unending road, the poem seems to enact a theologically modernist shift in focus away from eschatology and towards "the tactics of process"—specifically "the tactics of Jesus Christ" (Lofton 378).

According to this logic, suffering must be endured in the here-and-now before human beings can partake with Christ in His resurrection and ascension. "It is a grim picture of Man," Pitt admits, "but his case is not quite hopeless. His hope again – and there is no mistaking Pratt's meaning – is the crucified Christ, the suffering, self-sacrificing, forgiving, compassionate Son of Man" (*Master* 97). More generally, McAuliffe comments that "It is, on the whole, the Christological element reflected in Pratt's poetry which brings its religious content into its proper focus" (158). But Pratt's Christ is not simply Strauss's Jesus of History, as Djwa has argued.<sup>73</sup> And, understood from a Christian theological standpoint, Christ's crucifixion is not suffering for suffering's sake, nor an egotistical display, though from any other vantage point it might appear to be both.

James clearly understands the power of Christ's sacrifice, and of the metonymic symbols associated with that act: he writes, "The folly of the cross, so inexplicable by the intellect, has yet its indestructible vital meaning" (*Varieties* 364). Nevertheless, both James and Pratt are wary of certain forms of self-abnegation or self-mortification—whether associated with institutional or personal forms of religion—that only serve the

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73. See Djwa (*Evolutionary* 6). McAuliffe provides a thorough and convincing refutation of Djwa's argument with reference to the poem's use of the epithet "Son of Man" (177).

self: in *Varieties*, for instance, James issues a call for “religious men” “to discover some outlet for [asceticism] of which the fruits in the way of privation and hardship might be objectively useful. The older monastic asceticism occupied itself with pathetic futilities, or terminated in the mere egotism of the individual, increasing his own perfection” (364-65). Despite his emphasis on personal religion, then, James’s pragmatism extends beyond the individual to the society in which the individual is embedded; he has no use for those forms of self-abnegation which are really about the appearance of saintliness. Heroism is what redeems asceticism for James and Pratt, but only heroism such as Christ’s—that is, a heroism that is authentic, vital, and “objectively useful.” Like the Jesus of Matthew 23.25-29 or Luke 16.14-15, Pratt’s poetry consistently excoriates figures who fail to live up to this standard, such as the “priests put on parade / Before stone altar-steps” (“Inexpressible” 10) or the “Self-pinched, self-punished anchorite, / Who credits up against his dying / His boasted hours of mortifying” (“The Depression Ends” 265).

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, James was aware that religion, even personal religion, cannot remain cloistered; it is never a “personal” matter entirely. As a result, he could conclude that mysticism—like the spiritualism with which Pratt experimented, perhaps—“is too private (and also too various) in its utterances to be able to claim a universal authority” (*Varieties* 430). But James’s separation of the personal and the institutional is deliberately over-emphasized in *Varieties* for several reasons, including for rhetorical purposes. As Carrette observes, James

plays down (rather than ignores) the social dimension of religious emotion . . . ,  
although it is intriguing to note that, a few years later, when James fills in [J.B.]  
Pratt’s questionnaire on religious belief, James is more affirmative of a social

reading of religion. He responded to the question about whether religion is understood as “an emotional experience” by writing, somewhat surprisingly: “Not powerfully so, yet a social reality.” (89)

In this same questionnaire, James’s answer to the question “Why do you believe in God?” (qtd. in James, “Answers” 1184) is “Only for the social reasons” (1184), and he defines religion’s importance in terms of its “social appeal” as well as its corresponding ability to offer “corroboration, consolation, etc. when things are going wrong with my causes” (1183).

To these reminders of the importance of the social dimension of religious experience, one could also add that religious communities do not merely corroborate personal beliefs; they also mould them. While Pratt’s personal beliefs shaped his written responses to and against the Methodist Church, theological modernism, and spiritualism, these institutions and movements obviously shaped him, too. Indeed, there is no such thing as an unmediated personal experience or text, since individuals—and the narratives they create—are socially constituted and conditioned.<sup>74</sup> In his master’s thesis, Pratt seems to realize that the inevitable socialization of individuals affects how subjectivities are embodied in written texts: he writes, “With each Evangelist writing from his own point of view, it would be the most surprising anomaly in the history of human literature, if some transfiguration of the acts and sayings of Christ had not in all sincerity crept in” (“Demonology” 22). In light of such a passage, it seems absurd to argue— as Davey does in his attack on Frye and the “cosmopolitan-traditionalist stream” of Canadian literature (“Rationalist” 77)—that Pratt “believes in the myth of poetic objectivity” (65). But the

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74. See, for example, Capps (25ff.); Carrette (81); Pawelski (20-21); and Taylor (*Varieties of Religion* 23-24, 27-28).

more relevant point to make here is that Pratt follows the lead of James, who “does not leave religion merely in the hearts of individuals” (Pawelski 21). However, unlike James, Pratt in his later writing turns not to philosophy but to a socially oriented personal religion informed by Methodism, modernist theology, spiritualism, and the United Church, but ultimately focused on Christ.

To effect change in society, personal religious experiences and convictions must be communicated or translated into action—hence Pratt’s disdain for forms of religion that do not account for others. He critiques certain kinds of asceticism in part because he feels that they result in what James calls “unwholesome privacy” (*Varieties* 432; qtd. in Carrette 87). By contrast, Pratt’s heroes perform remarkable acts of bravery and self-sacrifice, and they are also responsible for single-handedly “raising the moral temperature of the community” (“Memories” 8) through their example: “There isn’t one person among us,” he declares, “who, having witnessed a fine sacrificial action, hasn’t felt like hoisting a flag to the masthead bearing the signal – ‘Let no one do a mean deed today’” (“Highlights” 4).<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, James maintains that the self-sacrifice of any heroic figure “consecrates him forever” (James, *Varieties* 364); that is, the Christ-like sacrifice of oneself can ensure immortality in a secular as well as a religious sense.

In poems such as “The Depression Ends” (1932), too, the very notion of utopia is an inherently social one: paradise is a place where one breaks bread with friends, or with those who are in need.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, in a relatively late lecture that includes a kind of précis of his own religious beliefs and of the inescapable social dimension of those beliefs, Pratt

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75. Pratt recycles this metaphor and repeats the phrase “Let no one do a mean deed today” in several of his other public talks, including “Memories of Newfoundland” (8) and “*Dunkirk*” (129).

would state rather definitively that “A life without a faith, without a tolerant kindness, without a love for one’s fellow beings, without a will to improve their lot is about the most dismal condition into which human nature can slump” (“In Quest” 283-84). The Pauline metaphor of the Church as “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12.27)—and of individuals as the interconnected members of that body—is apropos of such a lecture, but particularly, as McAuliffe duly notes, of *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (188).<sup>77</sup> In that poem, Pratt’s vital, self-sacrificing hero serves as a character foil to the hermetic mystics and “whited sepulchres” (Matt. 23.27) who fail to translate genuine religious convictions into deeds of social significance.

In *Brébeuf*, a poetic account of the seventeenth-century missionary activity and martyrdom of Jean de Brébeuf and other Jesuit missionaries in New France, Pratt’s Jamesian emphasis on a religion of the heart is placed in conversation, if not in conflict, with Thomist philosophy. As noted by the editors of *The Selected Poems of E.J. Pratt: A Hypertext Edition*, Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* “argued that reason (represented at its highest by the philosophy of Aristotle) and faith constitute two harmonious realms in which the truths of faith complement those of reason.” On the one hand, Aquinas—whose scholastic tradition of philosophy was officially endorsed in Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) and Pope Pius X’s anti-modernist *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), then further enshrined in the Catholic canon through Pius X’s *Doctoris Angelici* (1914)—claimed that God’s existence in the natural realm could be discovered through “unaided natural reason” (Jodock 9); on the other, the supernatural

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76. For Pratt’s commentary on the banquet table as a social and utopian space, see “*The Depression Ends*” (89).

could be “known only when God chooses to reveal it” to the faithful (9). Pratt, following James’s anti-materialist cues, could not easily assent to the former proposition. However, in *Brébeuf*, the poet’s narrativization of the eponymous hero’s sacrifice involves a capitulation to the Thomist view of reason, although it also seems to smuggle in Pratt’s Jamesian, anti-authoritarian biases. While on a trip back to France, Brébeuf is described returning

To Rennes – the Jesuits’ intellectual home,  
Where, in the *Summa* of Aquinas, faith  
Laid hold on God’s existence when the last  
Link of the Reason slipped, and where Loyola  
Enforced the high authoritarian scheme  
Of God’s viceregent on the priestly fold. (54-55)

Interestingly, this passage could be at once correct from the Thomist perspective (insofar as both faith and reason, both head and heart, are necessary to bring about knowledge of “God’s existence”) and implicitly critical of Roman Catholicism (insofar as Pratt’s words seem designed to take aim not only at the “high authoritarian scheme” of the Catholic Church as against the democratizing metaphor of the body of Christ,<sup>78</sup> but also at

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77. For McAuliffe’s commentary on “the Pauline notion of ‘the Body of Christ’ (1 Cor 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4:4-16, 5:22-33)” in relation to *Brébeuf and His Brethren*, see 188ff.

78. It is difficult not to read the phrase “high authoritarian scheme” as pejorative in light of Pratt’s Jamesian, anti-institutional religious biases (as discussed earlier in this chapter) and the publication of *Brébeuf* in the midst of the Second World War, around which time Pratt also published a number of blatantly anti-authoritarian poems, including “The Baritone” (whose original title in *Canadian Forum* was “Dictator [Baritone]”) and “The Truant.” Although Pratt’s critique of fascist politics should obviously not be conflated with his critique of Catholic Church hierarchies, the subtle grafting of Pratt’s anti-authoritarianism onto the story of *Brébeuf* creates a tension between the Jesuits and the Papacy that is not entirely without its own historical precedent. In 1773, for example,



neoscholastic Thomism's championing of human reason). As McAuliffe explains, "Pratt's distrust of pure reason is evident" in *Brébeuf*, where "his objectivity demands that he give it the dignity traditionally accorded to it by the Thomistic philosophy in which the Jesuits were schooled" (153). Still, she concludes that "While Pratt does not belittle the intelligence of the Jesuits, it is clear that his reason for admiring them is primarily that they are persons of faith" (153). In any case, this is a far cry from *The Iron Door* and Pratt's early Fideist poetry. There are intimations in the passage quoted above of Descartes's "long chains of reasonings" (17), for example, according to which, "as long as one stops oneself taking anything to be true that is not true and sticks to the right order so as to deduce one thing from another, there can be nothing so remote that one cannot eventually reach it, nor so hidden that one cannot discover it" (18). It is more likely, however, that Pratt borrowed his metaphor directly from Aquinas and his chain of causes, at the end of which could be found "a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God" (*Summa* Ia, Q.2, Art. 3). And yet Pratt emphasizes not the role of reason, but that of "faith," in gaining knowledge of this first link; whereas reason is found lacking, as Pratt's "slipped" connotes, faith actively "[lays] hold on God's existence."

Even so, neither James nor Pratt deny intellect or reason their place: most notably, the section on "Philosophy" in *Varieties* acknowledges the importance of the intellect regarding the problem of communication, since "we must exchange our feelings with another, and in doing so we have to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas" (432). Pratt dramatizes this issue most explicitly in *Brébeuf*, perhaps, where

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Pope Clement XIV's papal brief *Dominus ac Redemptor* suppressed the Society of Jesus (that is, the Jesuits) worldwide, although the brief was not uniformly obeyed and the Society "continued for a time to survive as an entity in Prussia and Russia and elsewhere" (Green 204).

the speaker affirms that for Brébeuf and the other Jesuits attempting to convert the Huron people to Christianity, “the first equipment was the speech” (53); that is, language is essential to the Jesuits’ civilizing mission.<sup>79</sup> When introducing the poem to one of his many audiences, Pratt confessed that he found it “rather amusing to find Brebeuf [*sic*] writing home to his general to get permission to alter the *nomine patris* formula. The Hurons could understand it only if it was stated – in the name of our Father, and of his Son, and of their Holy Ghost” (“*Brébeuf*” 125). Like Paul, who is described in Pratt’s *Studies in Pauline Eschatology* as having “adopted the customs, modes of thought and phraseology native to the peoples amongst whom he labored” (115), Brébeuf adopts and adapts language to achieve a social and religious end. While his own spirituality is still a vital component of his personal religion, he realizes that the intellect and speech are necessary to communicate that spiritual vision to others, to educate, and to proselytize: inhabiting Brébeuf’s consciousness, the speaker explains that “The efficacious rites / Were hinged as much on mental apprehensions / As on the disposition of the heart” (53). But as the above reference to “the *nomine patris* formula” illustrates, the translation of doctrine, or of any theological concept, involves transformations that foreground the slippery, polysemic nature of language. In a more extreme example, Pratt describes how, when the Iroquois are torturing Brébeuf, his fellow priest Gabriel Lalement, and their

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79. Although a discussion of race and Pratt’s depiction of the Hurons and Iroquois in *Brébeuf* falls outside of the scope of this dissertation, it is an important issue that has been taken up in poems such as Scott’s satirical “Brébeuf and His Brethren” and Eldon Garnet’s revisionary *Brébeuf: A Martyrdom of Jean De*, and in criticism by Clever, Guth, Innis, Kamboureli, and McAuliffe, among many others. As well, Pratt himself provides relevant—if sometimes fawning and credulous—commentary on the Jesuits’ activity in New France in texts such as “*Brébeuf and His Brethren*” (114). I find that Martin and Leopold’s reminder that “the fundamental mode of production for syncretisms is power” (98) serves as a useful entry point into such discussions as they relate to the subject of

Huron companions, the symbols and rituals they have used to communicate their faith are deliberately perverted, violently dislocated from their intended significations:

Now three o'clock, and capping the height of the passion,  
Confusing the sacraments under the pines of the forest,  
Under the incense of balsam, under the smoke  
Of the pitch, was offered the rite of the font. On the head,  
The breast, the loins and the legs, the boiling water!  
While the mocking paraphrase of the symbols was hurled  
At their faces like shards of flint from the arrow heads –  
“We baptize thee with water...

That thou mayest be led

To Heaven...

To that end we do anoint thee.[’] (106-107)

Even when they come from the mouth of a skilled linguist such as Brébeuf, religious symbols—such as “reed and sceptre, robe and cross, brier / And crown” (65)—are shown to be double-edged swords, “weapons from the armoury of words” (54) that can be turned against Brébeuf just as he has turned them against “the savages” (63), his would-be converts.

In his final moments, Pratt’s Brébeuf, as he is being tortured by the Iroquois, finds strength neither in institutional nor personal religion, but in Christ, who mediates between and ultimately transcends the two:

They would gash and beribbon those muscles. Was it the blood?

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missionary work generally, but also to Pratt’s own syncretistic practices and theological commitments.

They would draw it fresh from its fountain. Was it the heart?  
They dug for it, fought for the scraps in the way of the wolves.  
But not in these was the valour or stamina lodged;  
Nor in the symbol of Richelieu's robes or the seals  
Of Mazarin's charters, nor in the stir of the *lilies*  
Upon the Imperial folds; nor yet in the words  
Loyola wrote on a table of lava-stone  
In the cave of Manresa – not in these the source –  
But in the sound of invisible trumpets blowing  
Around two slabs of board, right-angled, hammered  
By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill. (108; emphasis in original)

Like Christ—and like Ignatius of Loyola, who emerged from the mystic's cave to share his *Spiritual Exercises* and found the Society of Jesus—Brébeuf also moves beyond a cloistered Christianity while avoiding the moral snares and material trappings of institutional religion. But Pratt's fascination with Brébeuf, whose source of strength lies neither in his heart nor his head, but in his over-belief in a Christ whose transcendental nature is connoted here by “the sound of invisible trumpets,”<sup>80</sup> may also have been rooted in Pratt's knowledge of and respect for Wesley, who shared in common with Brébeuf an “incarnational spirituality” as well as “an ardent attachment to the person of Christ” (McAuliffe 187). The conclusion of this poem may be read, then, as a fairly profound statement of faith on Pratt's part—even if it is couched within the narrative of Brébeuf's martyrdom. In *Brébeuf*, as in the oft-anthologized poem “The Truant” (1942), the symbol

of the cross functions as a metonymic stand-in for Christ, and the constant presence of both Christ and the cross in Pratt's poetry suggest that his own "attachment to the person of Christ" consists of more than "an admiring consideration of the act of faith as a heroic and incomprehensible necessity" (Dudek, "E.J. Pratt" 120). The cross is the literal crux upon which Pratt erects his life's philosophy and religion, the lens through which his poetry's paradoxes begin to come into focus. As he remarked to E.K. Brown, the cross is a symbol that "express[es] alike shame and glory, something strongly vernacular set over against cultivated imagery and language" (Letter, [21] Apr. 1942).<sup>81</sup>

Recalling Pratt's letter to Ina McCauley, in which he confesses, "it is unthinkable to me that Christ had his end on the Cross" (Letter, 2 May 1938), one might easily conclude that the symbol of the cross—in concert with Pratt's allusions to Christ and to other-worldly "invisible trumpets"—makes manifest the inadequacy of Djwa's contention that there is a "dichotomy between the transcendent seventeenth-century Christianity of Brébeuf, the poem's subject, and the human-centered, turn-of-the-century, new theology of Pratt, the poet" (*Evolutionary* 93). As I pointed out with reference to McAuliffe, there is a striking affinity between the mysticism of the Jesuits and of Wesley, whose "Methodist movement didn't aspire to churchhood" and whose "desired status was analogous in some ways to that of religious orders in the Catholic church" (Taylor, *Varieties of Religion* 72). The more significant problem with Djwa's claim, however, is that it confuses an ill-defined liberal "new theology" with Pratt's modernist theology; she

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80. McAuliffe provides numerous examples to demonstrate how, in Pratt's poetry, the trumpet is a biblical and literary symbol he employs to signify both "the voice of God" and, by extension, the afterlife promised to God's people (223-24).

81. Cf. Pratt's letter to Sister Dorothy Marie Doyle (Letter, 25 July 1956), in which he similarly emphasizes the theological significance and paradoxical nature of the cross as a symbol.

argues, for example, that Pratt's is a "new theology" because of his supposed rejection of the "Christ of history,"<sup>82</sup> despite the fact that "Few, if any, Protestant liberals—modernistic or otherwise—denied normative status to Christ and to the Christian tradition" (Hutchison 8). Furthermore, as McAuliffe stresses, "there is no real evidence that . . . [Pratt] subscribed to the unnatural divorce between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' of the post-Hegelian school" (31)—nor, I would add, is there evidence that the Christ of Pratt's poetry is, in the final analysis, "a real rather than supernatural being" (Djwa, *Evolutionary* 27). What Djwa calls Pratt's "new theology"—that is, his modernist theology—actually seems to resemble nineteenth-century secular humanism. Accordingly, one might argue that the real dichotomy in his poem is between his Protestant modernist theology—which smuggles in the anti-institutional sentiments detailed above—and the emphatically doctrinal Catholic Church that dictated an anti-modernist orthodoxy from the turn of the twentieth century until at least 1967, when Pope Pius X's *Oath against Modernism* (1910) was rescinded.

If in *Brébeuf* Pratt is concerned primarily with highlighting the Jesuits' faith and their attempts to share that faith with others, "The Truant" is concerned with communicating Pratt's own personal religion. As he told Pacey in 1954, "My own profession of faith was expressed in *The Truant*" (Letter, 29 Oct. 1954). But what is the substance of this faith? While some early critics were "greatly puzzled" by Pratt's poem (Pratt, Letter to Smith, 28 Jan. 1944)—in which the Truant defies the authority of a figure named "the great Panjandrum," who is introduced as a "forcibly acknowledged Lord" (125)—countless others have since sussed out its general message: perhaps most concisely, it is, in Pratt's own words, "an indictment of Power by humanity" (Letter to

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82. See, for example, Djwa's *Evolutionary* (6, 26-27).

Smith, 28 Jan. 1944); it is an anti-materialist and anti-authoritarian anthem, an assertion of human agency in the form of a “rebel will” (128). Yet truancy is advocated here not only as an empowering, secular life philosophy,<sup>83</sup> but as a kind of recalcitrant messianic attitude and orientation at the heart of what I have been referring to as Pratt’s anti-institutional personal religion.

Despite the poem’s thematic obsession with the subject of free will, only Clark’s “E.J. Pratt and the Will to Believe” seems to have traced this obsession back to James. Obviously, the question of free will was a major preoccupation for James, who “interpreted his personal distress in the terms of one of the great intellectual debates of the later nineteenth century, the question of free will versus determinism” (Evans, “Chains” 173).<sup>84</sup> Still, the question of free will was for Pratt primarily a religious question, and the rebellious natures of some of his most treasured heroes—including Brébeuf—can be contained by, and understood within, a general Christian framework. For this reason, one might be surprised to read in Djwa that “Pratt’s humanist but somewhat unorthodox new theology provides at least one indication that he would have found the conventional United Church pulpit of 1917 rather confining” (*Evolutionary* 110). Leaving aside the fact that the United Church of Canada was not formed until 1925, one might reply to Djwa’s claim that “Pratt’s human-centered evolutionary ethics” (109) could cause this kind of discomfort by noting that James and the theological modernists

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83. Birney, for example, interprets the Truant’s defiance in secular terms: “the symbols throughout are not of Christian submission,” he argues, “but of defiant endurance before firing squad, and under torture” (141). However, as McAuliffe suggests in her lengthier discussion of Brébeuf’s “thundering reproof to his foes” (*E.J. Pratt: Complete Poems 2*: 107), “Brébeuf should be seen as no less honourable for his outcry – only stronger and more human” (196).

84. For James on free will, see, for example, “Are We Automata?” and “The Will to Believe.”

were all caught up in a subjective turn initiated much earlier by Schleiermacher and other liberals, but this did not necessarily spell the end of Christ-centred ethics or theologies.

Indeed, the right to exercise one's free will is, in Pratt, indistinguishable from the right to choose to align one's will with Christ's: Brébeuf, for example, aligns himself with Christianity and therefore falls on what Pratt ostensibly believed to have been the right side of history—with the result that “The Will / And the Cause in their triumph survived” (109). But a similar alignment occurs at the end of “The Truant,” when the titular character bands together with his fellow human beings (in an alliance announced by the repetition of “We” in the final stanzas [130-31]) and rallies around “the Rood” and the sound of “bugles on the barricades” (131), which are symbolic surrogates for Brébeuf's “two slabs of board, right-angled” and its “invisible trumpets” (108). As in “From Stone to Steel” and the late poem “Cycles” (1951), beleaguered humanity finds salvation only in “the enduring, resisting, and suffering Christ of *Gethsemane* who is at the centre of Pratt's religion” (Frye, “Silence” 393; emphasis in original). For James, the source of Christ's strength, or of the martyr's over-belief in moments of persecution, remains a mystery beyond the scope of reason: in *Varieties* he writes, “If you ask *how* religion thus falls on the thorns and faces death, and in the very act annuls annihilation, I cannot explain the matter, for it is religion's secret” (qtd. in Sutherland, *Poetry of E.J. Pratt* 16; emphasis in original).<sup>85</sup> In “The Truant,” however, the answer to this riddle is not a secret; it is provided in the Truant's final assertion of free will, in his oath sworn “by the Rood” against all that the Panjandrum represents (131). Like Brébeuf's, the Truant's strength derives from Christ, whose symbol is the cross—though Sutherland



would inexplicably remark of “The Truant” that it “concludes with a fervent expression of . . . secular faith” (*Poetry of E.J. Pratt* 20).<sup>86</sup> If one considers a comment Pratt made in a letter to Sister Dorothy Marie Doyle, it seems obvious that Sutherland was mistaken: without equivocation, Pratt asserts that “The *Truant* is a Christian who defies this giant of Might and is willing to prefer pain and death to submission. The poem ends on the Rood, the sublimest symbol of sacrificial love” (Letter, 21 July 1957; qtd. in McAuliffe 180). That Pratt would don the mask of the truant either in his own life<sup>87</sup> or in his poetic “profession of faith” indicates the importance of free will in his personal religion. But as a student of theology, he would have known that James’s valuation of free will was compatible with many Christian traditions, including what he labels “the milder Arminianism” of the Newfoundland Methodists (Letter to Sutherland, 21 May 1954).

Finally, it must be noted that “The Truant”—which Pratt says he wrote “at the height of the Nazi regime” (Letter to Pacey, 29 Oct. 1954)—embodies anti-authoritarian rhetoric not to impugn God, but to reject all human institutions that have become corrupted by what Pratt, explaining the poem to his friends and audiences, refers to variously as “absolute power,” “tyrannical power,” and “a pagan god of power” (Letter to Pacey, 29 Oct. 1954; “The Truant” 132; Letter to Doyle, 21 July 1957).<sup>88</sup> Only those systems that he rejected—such as materialism in science, fascism in politics, and

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85. In the earlier poem “The Mystic,” Pratt’s speaker, reflecting on the mystic’s over-belief and strength of will, wonders the same thing: “Where do you bank such fires[?]” (1).

86. It is odd that Sutherland stresses here the “secular” nature of “The Truant,” a poem in which the concluding allusion to Christ is so explicit, yet argues for the “orthodox Christian” (viii) nature of such narratives as *The Cachalot* and *The Great Feud*, two poems in which any allusions to Christ are ambiguous at best.

87. Pitt refers on multiple occasions to Pratt’s truancy as a “mask” he used to fit in (*Truant* 19ff.), as part of a “need to compensate” (46), or as a “restless, even restive, truant spirit which seems to have overtaken him” (50).

fundamentalism in religion—are indicted in the poem itself. As McAuliffe points out, though, the poem “has often been misinterpreted as an expression of either the poet’s distorted notion of God or his complete rejection of the orthodox concept of the Deity” (62). To this she astutely adds that “What the Truant rejects is not God, but a god”;<sup>89</sup> “Pratt depicts, not his personal rejection of God, but humankind’s general obligation to reject what Pratt knew God is not, and never could be – a source of blind, impersonal power, either existing intrinsic to, or operating within, the confines of the universe” (64). In the same vein, Djwa, alluding to Huxley, identifies the Panjandrum as “simply the cosmic process, deified” (*Evolutionary* 115), and Milton Wilson, in an earlier interpretation, suggests that the Panjandrum is someone “who might be defined as the god of Nature, or, better, the god deduced from the operations of Nature, or, better still, the god of Natural Religion, or Deism” (“Pratt’s Comedy” 28-29). In a letter to Margaret Furness MacLeod, Pratt, offering his own explanation of the kind of “god” the Panjandrum represents, cites “Hitler’s God or the Teutonic Creation” (Letter, 25 Jan. 1944). Whatever the case, those critics who argue that the poem eschews God in favour of the individual<sup>90</sup> are surely mistaken: while it celebrates the individual and free will, these things are, as I established earlier, rooted in Christ and in all that the Christ of Faith represents as a transcendental rather than merely human figure. To be sure, Pratt would not have been comfortable following the example of Dr. Anderson, who asserts, “You are a god within your own being!” (qtd. in McMullin 144). Indeed, he was well aware what happens when we sing ourselves too much: in “A Prayer-Medley” (1933), a poem which

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88. See, for example, Pitt (*Master* 296).

89. Cf. Wilson (“Pratt’s Comedy” 29).

90. For proponents of this argument in its various forms, see, for example, Clark (115), Horwood (203), and Sharman (31-32).

prefigures “The Truant” in its praise of “unpredictable wills” (295), Pratt had already painted a satirical portrait of those who prayed, “Lord, how wonderful is the power of man; how great his knowledge!” (293). Such narcissism belies the fact that, in reality, human beings “have found no remedy for the deep *malaise* in the communal heart of the world” (“Prayer-Medley” 297; emphasis in original). By contrast, “The Truant” exhibits not just a stubborn faith in this flawed humanity, but a faith in God that actuates and enhances the former.

Critics who would too readily proclaim Pratt’s lack of religious faith, or at least of a “traditional” faith, must also reckon with another image of the poet not reproduced in his verse: the Pratt who, at 71 years of age, wrote to his daughter about how he and Viola had enjoyed sitting down together on a Sunday morning to listen to a radio sermon by Ernest Hunter, a United Church minister (Letter to Claire Pratt, 27 Sept. 1953). While it is true that Pratt wanted to do away with at least some parts of what Tom Marshall calls the “traditional notion of God” (35), it would be misguided to argue definitively that his solution was to: 1) reject the divinity of Christ; 2) renounce his faith in an afterlife or in any kind of supernaturalism in order to adopt a materialistic view of reality; or 3) adopt an immanentist or humanist philosophy in which human beings are themselves gods. As we have seen, his spiritualist conversion, his epistolary affirmations of faith, and his poetic engagements with Christian symbolism collectively preclude the first and second options, and these epistolary and poetic pieces of evidence—considered alongside his earlier concerns about atavism—emphatically preclude the third. As the previous sections of this chapter assert, Pratt occupies a religious position that—despite his attachment to the Christ of Faith—can hardly be called orthodox in the usual sense of that term. And

yet, Christ and Christ-like figures remain central in Pratt's poetry, symbols of determination and sacrifice in whom the social and transcendental aspects of Pratt's personal religion find their fullest expression.

## **2.5 CONCLUSION**

To downplay or even deny the significance of Pratt's measured adaptation of Jamesian, theologically modernist, and spiritualist ideas in his poetry is to risk misunderstanding the man whose focus on the figure and faith of Christ helped him to move beyond the polarities of personal and institutional religion. Nevertheless, there is a certain symmetry between Pratt's well-documented tendency to retrospectively fictionalize or hyperbolize his life stories<sup>91</sup> and my own attempts in this chapter to sculpt a critical narrative which, if not fictional, is really only one possible narrative among many. Other narratives of the role of religion in his life and poetry might emphasize, for example, some of the texts which I have neglected here—including his early allegorical or documentary long poems, his final long poem *Towards the Last Spike* (1952), or the hymns he wrote for *Triumphs of the Faith* (1952-55), which raise questions not only about the continued affiliation of church and state in Canada, but also about how Pratt's nationalism revives the theological modernists' emphasis on progress along moral and cultural lines.

Pratt's faith—however defined or directed—never seems to have been in question. As McAuliffe notes, “Nowhere is there any evidence of the one proverbial and decisive ‘crisis of faith’ from which Pratt is believed to have emerged as an atheist or, at

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91. See, for example, Pitt (*Master* 52).

best, an agnostic” (36).<sup>92</sup> Pratt’s poetry stands as a testament to the pervasive influence of evolved forms of religion in a post-Nietzschean world enveloped in what he referred to as “the fog of *Dover Beach*” (qtd. in McAuliffe 149); it is just as often accompanied by the hopeful note of trumpets as the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of “The sea of faith” (Arnold 113). In another letter to Sister Dorothy Marie Doyle, Pratt had written: “It has always been my belief that a life without a faith is the most miserable form of existence imaginable” (Letter, 10 July 1956). Time and again, this belief is borne out in his poetry: in *Clay*, faith is presented as an antidote to modern-day nihilism and ennui; in *The Iron Door* and other poetry from around the time of his spiritualist conversion, over-belief secures “proof” of an afterlife; and in his poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, especially, he affirms the Christ of Faith and places himself and his poetry in ecumenical conversation with other members of the body of Christ. The note of faith is occasionally sounded out here in other than the orthodox notes one might expect, but, given the Jamesian, theological modernist, and spiritualist contexts outlined above, and given Pratt’s understanding of the mutable nature of personal and institutional beliefs, that his faith differed from that of his father should hardly come as a surprise. What may come as a surprise—at least to those critics who confuse Pratt’s rejection of particular religious beliefs or of particular gods with a categorical rejection of religion—is the conspicuously Christian (and apparently orthodox) nature of his still-extant convictions: in the draft of a 1956 letter to Pacey, he wrote, “It may be a long time before the Sermon on the Mount will conquer the totalitarian quest for power & conquest. The two things are in conflict,

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92. Cf. McAuliffe (viii, 35, 49, 159, 200). In Djwa’s review of McAuliffe’s book, she notes that “McAuliffe wishes to show that Pratt did not suffer a ‘crisis in faith’ (a recurring phrase, apparently unattributed)” (319). Djwa’s *Evolutionary* uses the phrases “crisis in religious belief” (2) and “crisis in faith” (93), but not “crisis of faith.”

let us make no mistake about that. But what is there left to us but our devotion to Christ come what may?” (Letter, 12 Nov. 1956 [MS1]). Works such as *Brébeuf* and “The Truant” corroborate Pratt’s own devotion to the figure of Christ, and one might even posit that, through his poetry, Pratt remained for his whole career a “minister not in pastoral work.”<sup>93</sup>

Indeed, what Gingell calls “the controversy over Pratt’s religious convictions” (*E.J. Pratt* xxx) can no longer be considered a controversy in the same sense. As McAuliffe’s monograph powerfully demonstrates, the atheist and agnostic interpretation adopted by some of Pratt’s critics is simply untenable in light of the evidence now available in the form of his previously unpublished poetry, in his letters, or in previously elided biographical details. What is more, I would suggest that the “Christian humanist” label applied to Pratt is still “adequate,” as Pratt concedes in a letter to Pacey,<sup>94</sup> but only if the kind of humanism being touted accommodates James’s religion of the heart and celebrates the Christ of Faith. Finally, to refer to Pratt as a Christian poet without acknowledging the part his *séance* experiences paradoxically played in his personal religion is to ignore the kinds of social, cultural, and theological factors that inexorably altered the spiritual lives of many other Canadians in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

From the vantage point of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, it is

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93. Pitt explains how, “Though [Pratt] never served on circuit there, his name remained on the Red Deer [Methodist ministerial] rolls, as a ‘minister not in pastoral work,’ until two years before his death” (*Truant* 115; cf. Pitt, “Methodism” 225).

94. It should be noted, however, that in Pratt’s letter to Pacey he admits to a “genuine faith in Christian [*sic*] humanism,” double-underlining the modifier “Christian” as if to indicate where he felt the real emphasis should be placed (Letter, 12 Nov. 1956). On the matter of Pratt’s (Christian) humanism, I would most likely side with Sutherland, who

true that Pratt “may often appear to be embarrassingly out of fashion” (McAuliffe 200). Yet, as Djwa remarks in reply to Kamboureli’s dismissals of Pratt, “to complain that Pratt’s themes and forms do not reflect his contemporary world, or that his war poetry is an aberration, is like complaining that the early [P.K.] Page writes of socialism, that the later [A.M.] Klein writes of Auschwitz, and that Kroetsch at mid-career starts to write of postmodernism” (“Pratt’s Modernism” 69). As we have seen, Pratt’s religious concerns reflect that of his own time and place—and, as is the case with his Jamesian and spiritualist interests in particular, these concerns can sometimes be traced back to influences that have received surprisingly little attention from Pratt’s many critics. I am under no illusion that Pratt’s poetry will again assume the same place of prominence on the national stage, but to admit as much is not to inter Pratt’s literary corpus for good; rather, by offering a new account of this poetry in relation to James’s writings, I wish to suggest that the ghosts of James and Pratt are with us yet. While Pratt’s continued emphasis on Christ and the social dimensions of faith reflects the values of his predominantly Christian contemporaries, his Jamesian emphasis on a personal and non-doctrinal personal religion also augurs the proliferation, in the 1960s and beyond, of anti-institutional and unorthodox forms of religious expression.

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argues that, regarding self-sacrifice at least, “his emphasis . . . passes beyond the bounds of a merely humanistic view of the world” (*Poetry of E.J. Pratt* 11).

**CHAPTER 3:  
MAKE IT (RE)NEW: CONVERSION AND THE PERSONAL  
IN THE WRITINGS OF MARGARET AVISON**

**3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Compared to E.J. Pratt’s scheduled childhood conversion to Methodism, Margaret Avison’s much-publicized conversion to Christianity in 1963, at the age of forty-four, seems to have happened quite spontaneously. Yet, like the famous epiphany in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that turned Stephen Dedalus in the direction of an artistic rather than religious vocation, Avison’s epiphanic encounter with “the Jesus of resurrection power” (“A Religious Experience” 6), which threatened to turn her away from her poetry, took place after—but also as the result of—a great number of seemingly banal antecedents. That is, neither conversion nor its vaguely mystical relative, the modernist epiphany, can be summed up with reference to a single moment or event: as Morris Beja argues in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Joyce—through Stephen, who suggestively describes the epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation” (211)—used the word “epiphany” to refer both to the quotidian causes of such manifestations as well as to the moment of revelation itself (14). In retrospect, and with numerous accounts of Avison’s own spiritual experience at hand, one might posit that Avison’s conversion can also be described most accurately as an ongoing process involving multiple incidents, not as an unprecedented, one-time event.

In this chapter, I examine poetic and prose accounts of Avison’s conversion<sup>95</sup> by

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95. To avoid repetition, I will hereafter employ “conversion narratives” on occasion to refer inclusively both to Avison’s prose accounts of the conversion process or the 1963



engaging modernist and evangelical Christian discourses of the new, but also by analyzing her writing in relation to the radical social and religious changes that occurred in North America (and elsewhere) in the 1960s. Avison's conversion quickly became the focus of much Avison criticism, and critics continue to identify provocative points of intersection between her poetry and its possible biblical, theological, or literary sources of inspiration. William Aide seems to speak for a majority of these critics when he claims that "because of her poetry's closely drawn relationship between word and Word, a strictly literary criticism will never fully account for her" (76). However, neither can a biblical reading of Avison's poetry "fully account" for her poetry: while Avison's critics have continued to deliver convincing biblical and theological interpretations of her writing, few have considered how her conversion narratives are themselves socially constructed narratives; that is, when subjected to discourse analysis, these narratives simultaneously signal the distinctiveness of her religious experiences and her reliance on evangelical tropes to frame these experiences in her poetry.<sup>96</sup> Such issues will be discussed in the first section of this chapter, where I will also draw on Avison's autobiographical writings to complicate literary-critical accounts which have effectively reduced her conversion to an isolated religious experience. Though in some respects these literary-critical narratives merely re-enact Avison's own privileging of the events of January 4, 1963 over the events that led to and followed her seemingly inexplicable transformation, their articulation of Avison's conversion in relatively narrow conceptual terms recycles the same kind of reductive discourse of the new that was occasionally

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moment of conversion and to any of her poetry that appears to engage, either directly or indirectly, some aspect of her conversion experience.

deployed to exaggerate literary modernism's innovations or to mythologize its avant-garde as true iconoclasts.

Far-fetched as it may seem, my yoking together of modernist and Christian discourses of the new is not itself a novel gesture—though it does offer Avison's readers an alternative view of her poetic and religious development. As Michael North's *Novelty: A History of the New* (2013) suggests, the history of modernism's obsession with the idea of the new is not far removed from the discourse of renewal that informs Christian theology.<sup>97</sup> With this connection in mind, I will analyze Avison's conversion narratives in relation to Wayne Proudfoot's seminal arguments about conversion and his re-interpretation of the Jamesian notion of religious experience. As I maintain in the second section of this chapter, Avison's poetry, considered alongside various accounts of her conversion experience, speaks to her understanding of newness as renewal rather than creation—of “new” selves or “new” poetic language and forms—*ex nihilo*. In the later poem “Two Perilous Possibilities,” for instance, Avison explicitly links Pound's modernist slogan to the Christian's need for ongoing renewal: the poem ends with “make it new” (35), though the stanza in which this borrowing appears is framed as a question rather than as an imperative; the poem alludes to the salvation available to believers through Christ, but the phrase “again a new / genesis for one of us” (30-31) affirms the possibility of spiritual rebirth while implying that this kind of renewal may be necessary on more than one occasion, despite the finality and perfection of Christ's sacrifice. On the one hand, then, her poetry seems to cautiously re-inscribe evangelical desires for the truly

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96. Carmine Starnino comes the closest to acknowledging the performative aspects of Avison's conversion narratives and the discursive relations between her conversion prose and poetry in “He from Elsewhere Speaks: Avison's Spiritualized Syntax” (140-41).

97. See, for example, North (151-52).

new using the Pauline language of “radical transformation” (North 39).<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, as “Two Perilous Possibilities” illustrates, Avison’s writing also emphasizes the importance of conversion as an ongoing process of renewal, thus resonating with North’s reminders that Pound’s slogan was actually repurposed from books on Confucian philosophy and Chinese history (162-63), with James’s “bold rethinking of conversion” as a return to already-available truths (Richardson 365),<sup>99</sup> or even with Joyce’s inclusive notion of the epiphany as the sum of its various parts. In other words, the personal tensions dramatized in Avison’s conversion narratives point beyond themselves to broader tensions operative in the first half of the twentieth century, but also in the 1950s and 1960s, when Hugh Kenner had made Pound’s “quite obscure” slogan a catalyst for “serious debate” about the idea of the new (North 10).

Additionally, Avison’s conversion narratives contain clues of North America’s significant socio-religious shift, at mid-century, from a “collective-expressive” to an “individual-expressive” culture (Hammond 7-8). In the third section of this chapter, I will discuss how Avison’s personal religion, as it is variously embodied in her poetry, re-enacts this shift and dramatizes its attendant tensions. Some of these tensions are already evident in James’s *Varieties*, which proceeds with the personal-institutional distinction as one of its basic premises. Curiously, too, James’s book seems to have played an important early role in Avison’s conversion: in her 1979 interview with Harry der Nederlanden, Avison clearly communicated, for the first and only time in print, that

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98. North refers to this kind of “radical transformation” in connection with Ephesians 2:15, where conversion produces “one new man in place of the two” (qtd. in North 39).

99. In an 1897 letter to Henry Rankin, James wrote: “I am quite willing to believe that a new truth may be supernaturally revealed to a subject when he really asks. But I am sure that in many cases of conversion it is less a new truth than a new power gained over life by a truth always known” (qtd. in Richardson 365).

“What got her going back to church was reading the book *Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. She was tremendously moved by the people he interviewed” (3).<sup>100</sup> However, while Avison’s explicitly religious poetry often resists explicitly institutional or denominational formulations, she was herself firmly attached to the Christian church, loyally attending Toronto’s Knox Presbyterian Church for decades, and her poetry returns repeatedly to distinctly Christian themes which James would undoubtedly have considered “secondary growths superimposed” (qtd. in Richardson 406) on her personal religious experiences.

That Avison wrote most of her poetry as a practicing Christian yet during what Phillip E. Hammond calls the “third disestablishment” should, I argue, invite critics to contextualize such contradictions in terms of those imparted to her both by the society in which she lived and the church in which she worshipped. As Hammond explains, “the third disestablishment replaces a preference for a religion of choice with the option of being religious in one’s own way or not being religious at all” (140). For Avison, “being religious in one’s own way” meant becoming a Christian in what she called a “post-Christian” age,<sup>101</sup> despite the ironies and difficulties—personal as well as poetic—that accompanied this choice. Within the historical framework provided by Hammond, Avison’s conversion narratives are clearly the product of her collective-expressive evangelical culture and orthodox Christianity, though her poetic attempts to personalize her faith simultaneously register her resistance to inherited or prescribed forms in poetry and religion alike.

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100. Avison’s sustained interest in James’s *Varieties* is indicated by her 24 December 1965 letter to Jane Rule, in which she recommends Rule read James’s book to help Rule puzzle through the problem of free will in her own writing. I am grateful to David A. Kent for bringing this letter to my attention.

As her poetry demonstrates again and again, Avison's religious beliefs were "personal" in more than one sense: they were informed in part by James's notion of personal religion as an unmediated relationship "between man and his maker" (*Varieties* 29), as well as by evangelical discourse about the similarly intimate possibility of a relationship with "a personal God who cares" (Avison, "Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling" 3). While a number of Avison's critics have already noted what J.M. Zezulka calls her "private religious conviction" (Javed) or what others call her belief in "a personal God" (Hay 12; E. Davey 32), there have been no sustained attempts to interrogate the language of the "personal" or the "private" as they relate to the socio-religious rather than theological contexts out of which Avison's poetry emerged. The third section of this chapter will therefore also examine how Avison's poetry adapts and extends notions of the personal in her ongoing construction of a coherent Christian poetics of intimacy and incarnation. Of course, neither James's notion of personal religion nor the factors underlying Avison's "individual-expressive," "post-Christian" culture were completely new; like Avison's self-proclaimed "new-found faith" (*I Am Here* 142), these things developed gradually over time, responding to the intellectual and theological disruptions of their own century or of centuries past. Just as Charles Taylor can trace the origins of James's personal religion back to biblical precedents (*Varieties of Religion* 11-12) or North can trace modernists' "desire for the new" (161) back through the Reformation and Renaissance to even earlier historical instantiations of renovation and rebirth, Avison's critics should be able to identify in her poetry both the foundation of a new poetics of pan-denominational, personal religion and the cannibalized fragments of Jamesian, modernist, and evangelical discourse upon which that foundation appears to

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101. See, for example, *I Am Here* (146) or "Putting Computers in Perspective" (2).

have been impossibly established. Because Avison scholars have already identified many of her modernist debts and innovations, however, my focus here will primarily be on the ways in which Jamesian and evangelical discourse seem to inform her conversion narratives.

As Elizabeth Davey reasonably asserts in *A Persevering Witness: The Poetry of Margaret Avison* (2016)—which is, surprisingly, “the first book-length commentary on the poet to appear” (Kent, “Foreword” ix)—Avison’s writing can be considered an act of witness. Naturally, her conversion narratives, however defined, constitute a crucial part of her witness. In fact, they could even be said to rely on what Robert D. Richardson, referring to James’s *Varieties*, calls a “testamentary method” (251); they are equally studded with “narrative testimony” (395), and, like James in his prose, Avison seeks in her poetry “to offer a collection of stories rather than a logical argument” (395). How these poetic stories bear witness to Christ, but also to the evangelical, socio-cultural, and (to a lesser extent) literary-critical contexts in which her poetry and conversion narratives were written, is the goal of this chapter. As we will see, the project of narrating the self is fraught with tension for Avison not only as a modernist working through T.S. Eliot’s poetics of impersonality, but also as a Christian confronted with the paradoxes of the evangelical conversion narrative genre. Furthermore, in spite of readers’ fixation on Avison’s supernatural encounter of 1963 as an anecdotal entry-point into her writing (a rhetorical strategy I have already exploited myself), I would propose that treating this single moment as a neat temporal divide between two seemingly distinct halves of Avison’s life and poetry obfuscates alternative narratives of her spiritual development and later poetic achievement. I agree wholeheartedly with Carmine Starnino’s

pronouncement that “her genius was fulfilled chiefly—indeed, flourished entirely—in the climate of her conversion” (140), though I turn to other sources than Starnino did in order to elucidate both “the climate of her conversion” and the poetry that this climate helped produce.

In literary modernism, talk of the newness of poetic forms and techniques may operate under the aegis of, but does not quite bring about, an aesthetics of complete rupture, despite the modernists’ more radical claims. More accurately, such discourse is wedded to an aesthetics of renewal, of gradual revelation and individual transformation. In Avison’s case, I contend that talk of the newness of her post-conversion outlook must be moderated by an understanding of her incremental exposure, in the years leading up to her January 1963 moment of conversion, to the specific forms of Christian and modernist discourse that shaped her conversion narrative and subsequent poetry. Indeed, Avison’s poetry and prose conversion narratives—inspired by James’s *Varieties* but shaped by her Christian upbringing and later exposure to evangelical emphases on “personal faith” and the Person of Jesus Christ—merge modernist and Christian discourses of renewal to address the tensions of autobiographical and religious expression in the second half of the twentieth century.

### **3.2 THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW: CONVERSION NARRATIVES AND/AS DISCOURSE**

“What some might understand as the supposed immediacy of experience-present may actually be but an internalized residue of an earlier social world (its calculus), invented by others and that, through the actions of others, has been imprinted on us—or better put, *within* us.”  
(McCutcheon 8; emphasis in original)

“To read conversion as a discursive trope that mediates between the self-creativity of the autobiographical act and the self-annihilation demanded by the language of Protestant pietism is to recognize that evangelical spiritual autobiographies cannot be dismissed as merely imitative accounts controlled by exterior conventions.”  
(Payne 35)

Paradoxically, Avison’s private conversion on January 4, 1963, was neither private nor sudden. As I will demonstrate here, the language of her conversion narrative and poetry was inflected with discourse from seemingly disparate cultural spheres. To be sure, Avison occasionally channeled modernists such as Eliot,<sup>102</sup> as well as famous pre-modernist poets with Christian convictions, such as George Herbert, John Donne, or the proto-modernist Gerard Manley Hopkins. What is less obvious, however, is the extent to which Avison’s writings do more than exhibit the influence of individual poets in their adaptation of a trans-historical evangelical discourse of conversion in relation to the evolving, and sometimes internally conflicted, modernist and Christian discourses of her own time. To map out such influences and contexts, I will begin by highlighting some of the shared elements of Avison’s conversion narrative in its various iterations before briefly introducing Proudfoot’s “constructivist” approach to religious experiences as socialized experiences, so as to outline the basis for my interrogation of Avison’s conversion narratives and language of religious experience. In the process, I will draw on

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102. See, for example, Elizabeth Davey’s *Persevering* (82, 284), Milton Wilson’s “The Poetry of Margaret Avison,” Robert James Merrett’s “Margaret Avison on Natural History: Ecological and Biblical Meditations,” J.M. Kertzer’s “Margaret Avison: Power, Knowledge and the Language of Poetry,” or Kent’s *Margaret Avison and Her Works*. The comparisons of Avison’s poetry to Eliot’s are apt, given the many echoes of Eliot in *Winter Sun* and *The Dumbfounding* (consider, for example, “GATHER my fragments towards / the radium, the / all-swallowing moment” [“Searching and Sounding” 202]), their incarnational emphases, or even her silent borrowing of Eliot’s phrase “always now” (“Burnt Norton” 182) as the title of her collected poems. However, the subject of conversion highlights one of the most salient differences between the two poets: whereas Avison celebrates conversion as a central feature in her poetry and journey of faith, Eliot “insisted that conversion was not applicable to his own spiritual life” (Callison 1).



discourse analysis to read Avison's prose writings more productively in relation both to the generic tropes and formulae of conversion narratives, and to the anti-institutional, epiphanic language of the "personal"—which I discuss at greater length in this chapter's final section—that came to characterize literary as well as religious movements in the twentieth century.

The unabridged story of Avison's conversion, as constructed from her prose and scattered interviews, generally contains the following plot-points or events: it begins with, or takes place in the context of, "a 'gloomy' period" ("A Religious Experience" 5)<sup>103</sup> stretching roughly from 1959 to 1961, a period in which she "began to search seriously" for meaning ("Margaret Avison's Voice" 298) and in which "a significant shift from [her] daily life's old axis seemed inevitable" (*I Am Here* 139);<sup>104</sup> in approximately 1959, while working at Victoria University, she had a jarring encounter with a proselytizing woman who encouraged her to attend Knox Presbyterian Church ("Spirit" 31; "A Conversation" 68; *I Am Here* 140); sometime in or before 1961, she began reading James's *Varieties*, which purportedly spurred her to start attending services at Knox (Avison, "Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling" 3; "A Conversation" 68; *I Am Here* 141) as well as "7 a.m. prayer meetings" ("A Religious Experience" 5); after quietly sitting in on services for some time, a fellow church-goer recommended to a frustrated—because still-unbelieving—Avison that she talk to Dr. William Fitch, Knox's minister ("A Religious Experience" 5; *I Am Here* 141); and in late 1962, she met with Fitch, who prescribed for the ailing Avison daily readings from the gospel of John ("Margaret

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103. See also Careless (31) and Avison, *I Am Here* (139).

104. During this time, Avison describes herself as having had "an unsettled frame of mind," adding that "a significant shift from my daily life's old axis seemed inevitable" (*I Am Here* 139).

Avison: The dumbfoundling” 3; “A Religious Experience” 5, “Spirit” 31; “A Conversation” 68; *I Am Here* 142). After these precedents, we have the moment(s) of the January 4 conversion itself: while reading John 14.1 (“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me”), Avison “Suddenly . . . felt the overwhelming presence of Jesus Christ in the room” and “felt she couldn’t breathe—as if all the air had been sucked from the room” (“A Religious Experience” 6); she offered up resistance, since she believed that accepting Jesus Christ would force her to give up her poetry (“Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” 3; “The Quiet Centre” 170; “Spirit” 31, “A Conversation” 68; *I Am Here* 142); but she then witnessed an unusual event: “my desk top, which was a big oak thing, had been clear, but suddenly, it seemed like there was something on it that was shattered with a hammer and the bits were scattered all over and began to arrange themselves in patterns as I watched. Then, when I looked again, there was nothing on the desk” (“A Religious Experience” 6).<sup>105</sup> After this final incident, Avison stopped resisting, and the extent of her self-surrender is indicated by her stated willingness to give up writing poetry—though she soon realized that this sacrifice was unnecessary (“The Quiet Centre” 170). In some versions of the narrative, Avison declares her self-surrender while throwing her Bible (“Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” 2; “Spirit” 31; *I Am Here* 142),<sup>106</sup> a gesture that might be read as a final act of defiance. In most accounts, though, the profundity of Avison’s conversion is signaled by several

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105. Other accounts of this event, which contain subtle differences, can also be found in “Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” (3) and *I Am Here* (142). Significantly, in *I Am Here*, this event is said to have taken place *after* her self-surrender, not as one of the pivotal factors that led to this surrender.

106. In her interview with Rose Simone, Avison says that she threw her Bible immediately after she felt a presence in the room but prior to the desk incident (6). The question of where she threw her Bible also depends on the version in which this act

sudden and dramatic transformations, including her newfound ability to tolerate and make sense of the Bible (“Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” 3; “Spirit” 32), the fact that her “five senses were noticeably quickened” (*I Am Here* 142; cf. “Spirit” 31), her facility in writing new verse (“Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” 4; “Spirit” 31-32; *I Am Here* 142), and her general sense that “something was a little different” (“A Conversation” 68).

On the surface, Avison’s autobiographical accounts of her conversion appear to recreate what was, fundamentally, a private religious experience. No one witnessed the event, and Avison’s accounts are first-person reflections on the event and its effects on her spiritual life. However, her conversion narratives are published, public texts, and they contain many of the elements James identifies as constitutive of genuine religious experiences. That is, the language of these narratives seems to confirm Peter A. Dorsey’s claim that “accounts of conversion, various as they are, do share certain rhetorical features” (31).

Readers familiar with *Varieties*—the text Avison read with interest prior to 1963—will notice at least three common elements of evangelical Christian conversion narratives reproduced in Avison’s own texts: the conversion typically occurs when the individual is in a dark or “sick” pre-conversion state, it is brought about by the individual’s eventual self-surrender, and it often results in a temporary sharpening of the new convert’s senses. Traditionally, in such narratives, “conversion occurred out of the depths of the greatest despair and after periods of greatest affliction” (Dorsey 34). In James’s view conversion alone can bring an end to this period of affliction, which

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appears: for example, in the interview with *Der Nederlanden*, he reports that she “threw the Bible out through the window” (3).

ultimately causes the individual to become “divided”; conversion, for James, is “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities” (189). Similarly, Avison’s conversion took place during a “grey period” (“A Religious Experience” 8) in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Extrapolating from her autobiographical accounts of these years, one might surmise that she loosely resembled her own “Mirrored Man” from *Winter Sun* (1960), a discontented Prufrock figure whom she describes as “Grey, separate, wearily waiting” (21). Like many of James’s pre-conversion protagonists, Avison also struggled with a divided self, both before and after 1963: “In my person,” she remarked to *Der Nederlanden*, “an expression of the two-person [the old and the new man] [*sic*] is present” (4);<sup>107</sup> and, as a recent convert involved in both university and church communities, she observes that she still “felt like two persons, or two-faced in either context” (*Perseverance* 24).

Avison’s conversion narratives also reproduce two other evangelical Christian tropes present in a number of James’s case studies: the trope of self-surrender as a prerequisite for conversion and the trope of heightened senses as one of conversion’s immediate effects. James notes, for instance, that “self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life” (210); in his philosophy of religion, the “religious consciousness” has at its core a “complex sacrificial constitution” (49). Whether compelled by her conviction that her poetry had supplanted God in the years prior to her transformation—which would have prevented her from

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107. *Der Nederlanden*’s gloss of “the two-person” as “the old and the new man” appears to be a deliberate reference to Ephesians 4.20-24. See below for more on Avison’s own

obeying the first commandment<sup>108</sup>—or by her exposure to *Varieties* and the conventions of Christian discourse, Avison’s conversion narratives consistently emphasize her willingness to give up her poetry. In these texts, her self-surrender figures as the renunciation of her poetic vocation.<sup>109</sup> Finally, as in James’s study, where a “typical consequence of conversion was that it altered the believer’s perception of the world . . . and the believer, at least temporarily, felt that he or she was viewing nature for the first time” (Dorsey 37), Avison’s narratives describe how her “five senses were noticeably quickened” immediately following her conversion (*I Am Here* 142). In her 2003 interview with Sue Careless, this “sense of newness”—to borrow a phrase from James’s student, E.D. Starbuck (qtd. in Dorsey 37)—is marked: “When she stepped outside,” Careless relates, “the world seemed to come alive with colours and perfumes she had not noticed since she was a child” (31). Even apart from her writing, then, Avison’s conversion had aesthetic as well as religious repercussions.

While such parallels may have been purely coincidental, Avison’s Christian background and recent fascination with *Varieties* lend some credibility to the “constructivist” claim that religious experiences, and our attempts to capture them in

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allusions to this passage in her poetry.

108. In Reformed Christianity, the first of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

109. In *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (2010), Gordon T. Smith examines the notion of surrender within the broader context of revivalist theology, commenting that “salvation comes when we surrender our rebellious will to the will of God” (4); and Dorsey similarly explains the importance of self-surrender for James, who was very familiar with the revivalist tradition outlined by Smith, by noting that “the authors of conversion accounts” frame conversion “as a process of submission” which “entails a losing of the self in the irresistible power of God’s will” (34). Given these contexts, it makes sense that, in Avison’s own narrative, it is only when she finally relents and sacrificially offers up her poetry that she feels empowered to write and to embrace the act of writing as an integral part of her new Christian identity.

language, are actively informed by our respective socio-cultural contexts.<sup>110</sup> Proudfoot and other constructivists (as opposed to “perennialist” or “*sui generis*” critics) argue that religious experiences are always social, insofar as our responses to and articulations of these experiences are socialized responses and articulations. The self is constituted in and through language, as are any textual inscriptions of that self or its experiences of the world. As Stephen S. Bush explains, in the constructivist view, “religious experiences are determined by the experiencer’s culture” (101). In James, by contrast, religious experiences are “the primordial thing” and involve “direct personal communion with the divine” (*Varieties* 30); they are trans-cultural, “hav[ing] a common core that is the same across religious tradition, time, and place” (S. Bush 101). In the *sui generis* view, therefore, religious conversion “typically appears to spring from a source outside the conscious, language-forming self” (Dorsey 194). Although such an approach renders mystical, epiphanic experiences inaccessible to critique, *Varieties* is preoccupied not with exploring the exact nature of such transcendental experiences, but rather with cataloguing them and examining how their articulation yields information about individuals’ varying cultural contexts and psychological responses.

To the extent that conversion narratives are public texts and are meant to serve as part of a religious community’s “initiation ritual” (Dorsey 39), the writing of such narratives is an illocutionary act as much as it is an act meant to convey specific information about its author’s spiritual journey. In other words, Avison’s conversion narratives, like others, could be said to perform “a socializing function” (Dorsey 8-9). Much like Pratt’s perfunctory conversion to the Methodist faith, Avison’s own

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110. Among constructivist scholars, Proudfoot in particular has gained recognition for his work on James, and his 1970s and 1980s writings continue to animate contemporary

conversion—while dramatically different in many respects—could be explained in terms of the “linguistic, behavioral, and cultural expectations” (Dorsey 9) placed on her, wittingly or unwittingly, by representatives of the Christian faith.

Because conversion narratives are a form of public discourse, they respond to contemporary socio-cultural and religious concerns as well as an evolving matrix of generical and literary conventions. In the same way, Avison’s poetry employs the language of conversion and other forms of religious discourse in its dramatization of seemingly private experiences. But in *The Dumbfounding* (1966), she often employs such language self-consciously: in “A Story,” the poem Avison claims to have written the day after her conversion (*I Am Here* 142), the poem’s title itself hints at the constructed nature of conversion narratives, and its dialogic structure meta-poetically re-enacts the process through which intense personal religious experiences are shared but also distorted through language, resisting translation into narratives that can be understood or appreciated at second hand. As well, just as Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is suffused with the incantatory language of the Anglican liturgy, as if to reclaim and re-enchant the radically experimental repetitions of modernists such as Gertrude Stein, *The Dumbfounding* frequently co-opts the language and syntax of Christian creeds as if to provide a theological sanction for Avison’s personal reflections on religious subjects: recreating the liturgy’s claims about Christ’s divinity using the triadic past-, present-, and future-tense construction of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, “In Truth” succinctly describes the soon-to-be-resurrected Christ as one who “lived, is, will be” (33), and “The Word” again venerates Christ as “One / whose name has been, and is / and will be” (44-46). With this kind of self-reflexivity and blatant liturgical borrowing on display, Zezulka’s assertion

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debates about the nature of religious experience.

that Avison's "was a private religious conviction" (qtd. in Javed) surely requires further clarification and development.<sup>111</sup> While her convictions may have been held privately, they were communicated publicly in her poetry, which sometimes mimics the language of institutional Christianity's foundational creeds.

In her later prose and poetry, Avison appears to align herself even more explicitly with a constructivist position according to which language actively informs both private experiences and our public articulations of those experiences. For example, in "To Wilfred Cantwell Smith," a poem from her Griffin Poetry Prize-winning collection *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (2002), she muses,

Our native language shapes us, does it not  
even as it shapes itself upon the page?  
The languages you've learned, in life and college,  
carve and emboss characters in your thought?  
Hebrew's ornate iron, its quirks around the line  
(vocal or consonant) in you have wrought  
the odd intransigent openness – and untaught  
much we grew up to mimic – or disdain. (1-8)

Avison's recognition that one's personal experiences or thoughts are informed by one's language and familial, socio-cultural, and historical contexts predates the constructivist movement; still, her suggestion that language informs experience but is somehow

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111. In what sense are Avison's convictions "private," for example, and to what extent do they remain private once they have become part of her published oeuvre? My own responses to such questions are formulated here with reference to the constructivists, but also in the next two sections of this chapter, which discuss Avison's poetry in the context of the mid-century shift towards "individual-expressive" forms of religion (Hammond 2) and evangelical Christian discourse of the personal, respectively.



autonomous (it “shapes itself upon the page”), resonates more with the constructivists or even the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis than it does with James’s *sui generis* ideas. Although “To Wilfred Cantwell Smith” is not explicitly about religion, the poem usefully outlines Avison’s views about how language, and the socio-cultural or religious concepts, symbols, and assumptions embedded in language, can actively sculpt us from within.<sup>112</sup> Taking this idea to its figurative extreme, the speaker transforms the poem’s addressee into a legible text described in terms of “a spare poetry” (21), so that “what’s been sought / within shines there, articulate, through the night” (24-25). But it is what remains unsaid at the end of the poem that most clearly brings her poetry in line with the constructivists’ overarching thesis: while the speaker’s attempted readings in foreign languages have helped her to better understand her friend, they have also created expectations; what “shines there” in her friend is exactly what she has been trained to seek out and “read” in him.

If Avison’s ideas in “To Wilfred Cantwell Smith” accord with those of the constructivists, however, her persistent return to the notion of ineffability as an inherent property of genuine religious experiences suggests a fundamental incompatibility. Like James, she seems to accept that certain transcendental realities and religious experiences defy, or even precede, language.<sup>113</sup> Along these lines, David Lyle Jeffrey posits that, at base of Avison’s tendency to recourse to the trope of ineffability lies her conviction

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112. Avison had already explored some of these ideas in “The Bible to Be Believed,” where she contemplates the theological, philosophical, and linguistic implications of Christ (the Word) reading the scriptures (the word), asserting that “The word read by the living Word / sculptured its shaper’s form” (1-2).

113. Regarding James’s writings on mysticism, Proudfoot argues that “James treats ineffability as if it were a simple property of the experience, or a phenomenological characteristic that could not be further analyzed. He takes the fact that the experience

(consonant with the opening of the gospel of John) that “the poet’s words do not create. The Word that creates life – or more properly, is life – is before and beyond poetry, and thus not finally utterable” (70-71). Both Avison’s poetry and prose accounts of her conversion appear to support Jeffrey’s contention. When speaking with Rose Simone about the precise moment of her conversion, for instance, Avison demurs: “It’s very hard to describe” (6). Or, as Avison had told *Der Nederlanden*, the whole affair “sounds so magical” (3). Events such as the sudden appearance and independent “rearrange[ment]” on her desk of papers “like iron filings” (“Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” 3; *I Am Here* 142) proved particularly difficult to describe, which is perhaps why this incident is frequently elided—though it reappears and features prominently in *I Am Here and Not Not-There: An Autobiography* (2009).<sup>114</sup>

In “When We Hear a Witness Give Evidence,” from *No Time* (1989), Avison also deploys ineffability in the Jamesian sense to signal authentic encounters with higher truths or realities:

No, there’s no angel-song  
tonight. But when someone tells it, something,  
a Presence, may briefly shine  
showing heaven again,  
and open. (17-21)

Language fails the speaker, who is forced to use the bathetic, vague “something” to describe an otherworldly glimmer of a transcendental “Presence.” A similar lowering

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defies expression to mean that it can be known only by acquaintance and thus is closer to feelings than to states of the intellect” (125).

occurs in “Voluptuaries and Others,” first published in the 1957 edition of A.J.M. Smith’s *Book of Canadian Poetry*, where Avison quips, “That Eureka of Archimedes out of his bath / Is the kind of story that kills what it conveys; / Yet the banality is right for that story, since it is not a communicable one” (1-3). The difficulty of rendering religious experiences in human terms that one finds in Avison’s conversion narratives, or in poems such as “When We Hear a Witness Give Evidence,” is prefigured here—in the secular context of Archimedes’ bathtub revelation<sup>115</sup>—as an aesthetic or practical impossibility. In each of these examples, Avison’s writing participates in an established tradition which regards intense religious experiences or epiphanies as private, as beyond or previous to language and rational thought (and thus, like James’s religious experiences, impervious to doctrinal formulation). However, whether self-consciously or no, these texts reproduce the trope of ineffability and thus place Avison in conversation with the constructivists as well as James. As Jamie Callison points out, ineffability is itself a religious and literary convention (5), and in Avison studies this convention has even structured critics’ responses to her poetry.<sup>116</sup> Like many converts in *Varieties*, though, Avison appears to

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114. In *I Am Here*, Avison describes the desk incident in great detail, then applies it as a metaphor for the transformative effects of her resulting conversion: “a new design had come into my life, like that iron-filing display taking shape on the desk” (142).

115. The bathtub is apparently a locus of transformative, epiphanic experiences for Avison and for Pound: her description of Archimedes’ bathtub moment is vaguely reminiscent of Pound’s “Canto LIII,” in which

Tching prayed on the mountain and  
wrote MAKE IT NEW  
on his bath tub  
Day by day make it new  
cut underbrush,  
pile the logs  
keep it growing. (264-65)

116. Elizabeth Davey, for example, suggests that Avison’s interpretations of her religious experiences are “inevitably connected to the transcendent and ineffable God of the Scriptures” (53).

employ this convention not simply out of theological or phenomenological necessity, but out of a desire to meet one of the tacitly expected “conditions for the identification of an experience as mystical” (Proudfoot 125).

In Avison’s poetry, a recurring focus on epiphanies, including those not strictly religious in nature, links her writing to the evangelical discourse of conversion—in which the ineffability of the epiphany *qua* conversion has historically been a defining feature—but also to modernist aesthetics, via Joseph Conrad, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and other heirs to the Romantic obsession with epiphanic experiences. That her writing would engage with the concept of conversion in different registers is understandable, given Dorsey’s claim that “conversion, in its sacred and secular manifestations, is an almost inescapable construct in the cultures we call Western” (2). According to the modernists, epiphanies, like conversions, are intensely powerful but also ephemeral: in Joyce’s *Stephen Hero*, the eponymous protagonist defines an epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself”; and these epiphanies, like many of the conversions recorded in *Varieties*, centre around “the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (211). A similar blurriness between the discourses of epiphanies and conversions—or profound religious experiences more generally—persists in recent scholarship, too: in *Religious Experience: A Reader*, Russell T. McCutcheon’s description of religious experience as “unique and thus distinguishable from the other sorts of experiences that people regularly report having” (2) is reminiscent not only of Conrad’s description of epiphanies as “rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash—before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence” (104), but also of

Woolf's description, in "A Sketch of the Past," of our default "cotton wool" state of "non-being," which is sporadically interrupted by a "sudden violent shock" (71).

Ordinary moments or actions give way, at least temporarily, to extraordinary revelations.

Like Joyce and Woolf, Avison viewed the act of writing itself as a process dependent on such revelations: "At times one is blessed with poignant awareness of things seen. Exact rendering of those heightened moments can evoke the right word now and then – and create an appetite for more such word-events" ("Foreword" 13). However, there seems to be a contradiction here: if epiphanies ("heightened moments") are "word-events," how can they also be ineffable or transcendental? Where does ineffability end and writing begin? Avison's statement might raise more questions than it answers, yet its language nevertheless re-affirms her reliance on an equally fraught modernist discourse: epiphanies of any variety, religious or otherwise, are apparently best received by "religious geniuses" (James, *Varieties* 6) or by a "man of letters" (Joyce 211) who exhibits mastery over his materials and is somehow able to achieve an "Exact rendering" of his vision. And modernist discourse informs Avison's poetry, as well. In "Voluptuaries and Others," where the "banality" (3) of the setting provides a contrast for the epiphanic "lighting up of the terrain" (5), such an epiphany or "heightened moment" is (to quote from Beja's definition) "out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it" (18). As her critics have noted, Avison's epiphanies also involve literal or figurative light; this light is not always symbolic of religious conversion, at least in early poems such as "Voluptuaries," but in verse composed after 1963 Avison frequently emphasizes such connections—much like James had emphasized the importance of "luminous phenomena, *photisms*" in his collection of conversion narratives

(251; emphasis in original).<sup>117</sup>

Whereas “Voluptuaries” ultimately concludes with Avison’s “quest for Light” and faith in poetry “severely disappointed” (Jeffrey 65), a short lyric from *Momentary Dark* (2006) acts as spiritual ballast to this early poem, offering a more developed—and decidedly more hopeful—meditation on the power of epiphanies-as-illumination, all without insisting on religious outcomes or interpretations. “Beneficences” opens with Avison’s assertion that epiphanies, figured here as temporary releases “into the person-freeing silences” (3), can stem from either solitary or communal experiences: consistent with modernist discourse of the epiphany in its invocation of light and ephemerality, the first kind—“an unemphatic, unremarked / fugitive pang of beauty” (6-7)—can proceed from seemingly commonplace moments, such as “a glimpse of green / hillside suddenly / sunlit” (8-10). The second kind, which carries with it religious as well as aesthetic implications, occurs when “everyday acquaintances have / gathered” (17-18): such an epiphany can be triggered by “the build / of a cathedral of / words or music” (23-25). Gently distancing itself from James’s insistence on the private nature of religious experiences, Avison’s poem underscores the role that both solitary and communal epiphanies play in helping individuals escape what Jeffrey, discussing her “pre-conversion” poetry, calls a “habit-locked subjectivity” (60).

### **3.3 “THE GOLDEN STEPPING STONES TO FAITH”: AVISON’S CONVERSION AND/AS PROCESS**

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117. See, for example, “Water and Worship,” “Our Only Hour,” and “The Singular.” For more on Avison’s symbolic use of light imagery to describe epiphanic experiences, see E. Davey (42) and Jeffrey (69).

“Were it true that a suddenly converted man . . . is, as Edwards says, of an entirely different kind from a natural man, partaking as he does directly of Christ’s substance, there surely ought to be some exquisite class-mark, some distinctive radiance attaching even to the lowliest specimen of this genus, to which no one of us could remain insensible, and which, so far as it went, would prove him more excellent than ever the most highly gifted among mere natural men. But notoriously there is no such radiance.”  
(James, *Varieties* 238)

“With a glance at my watch, I firmly stood up, collected coat and bag, and left for my daily assignment, resolutely blanking out the morning’s events.  
But the new direction declared itself bit by bit.”  
(Avison, *I Am Here* 142)

While Avison’s conversion narratives—and, consequently, her critics—focus somewhat obsessively on January 4, 1963, as the moment of her conversion, both her poetry and prose point to a more complex understanding of conversion. On one hand, Avison repeatedly returns to this date in order to emphasize its particular significance as a moment in her spiritual and poetic development; on the other hand, she also goes to some lengths to catalogue various “golden stepping stones to faith” (“Margaret Avison’s Voice” 298), describing how her dramatic conversion of 1963 was bracketed by a series of public encounters and private transformations. Following James’s flexible definition in *Varieties*, then, one might argue that, for Avison, conversion is a “process” that can be either “gradual or sudden” (189); it cannot be summed up wholly in terms of what James labels “instantaneous conversion” (227), or what Dorsey refers to as “the Augustinian pattern of focusing on a single decisive event” (34). This Augustinian pattern, typically embraced by “some Methodists and other evangelicals” but abandoned in “most spiritual autobiographies” (Dorsey 34), is supplemented and occasionally eschewed in Avison’s poetry. For James, it appears that while the more “dramatic” (*Varieties* 227) model of instantaneous conversion may serve a crucial rhetorical and illocutionary function in

narratives of religious experience,<sup>118</sup> the model of gradual conversion may be the more accurate in a majority of cases; and as Avison's own case makes clear, such dramatic conversions are often anticipated—and followed—by other, smaller transformations. In this shared view, the converted need to continually recalibrate and refine themselves, psychologically or spiritually, even long after they have been “converted.”

Gordon T. Smith notes how, in evangelical Christian traditions influenced by Revivalism, “The language of salvation and volition (or surrender) is all wrapped up in the assumption that conversion is punctiliar. You can date it. You can mark it” (5). But this primarily evangelical understanding of conversion is rebutted by other Christians as well as by James.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, adapting such rebuttals of punctiliar and complete conversion into discussions of aesthetic rather than religious transformation, one might add that only the most “evangelical” of modernism's iconoclasts championed the idea that a single, definitive break with the past was possible.<sup>120</sup> Avison is evangelical in neither of these two senses. To be sure, her imaginative return to the specific moment of the January 4 conversion in her interviews and autobiographical writings suggests the

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118. James comments that the “instantaneous” model of conversion “seems called for” by certain religious traditions such as Moravian Protestantism and Methodism (227-28). This model serves an illocutionary function insofar as the rendering of the experience in this way—as sudden, complete, and supernatural—might have been one of the spoken or unspoken prerequisites for admission into, or social acceptance and capital within, a particular religious community.

119. As Dorsey notes, “except in the most evangelical and antinomian traditions, conversion narratives record not a single moment of regeneration but a series of awakenings interspersed with periods of despair and melancholy” (34). Additionally, as the first epigraph of this section suggests, for James, the new convert is really different in degree, not in kind; even those who claim to have been instantaneously and utterly transformed will inevitably show themselves to be human and must therefore appeal to God to forgive and redeem them once more.

120. F.T. Marinetti, for one, comes to mind: in “The Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), he poses the rhetorical question, “Why should we look back over our shoulders, when we



validity of the punctiliar interpretation to which her critics have subscribed *en masse*; however, most of the texts that foreground this specific date also explicitly refer to her conversion as a process or at least imply as much by enumerating the numerous events leading up to this moment and thus creating what is essentially a causal narrative. In her interview with Cristina Cassanmagnago, Avison says of her conversion, “Gradually I see that it started when I was eight years old” (298). Describing some of the events in this long process of conversion, she explains, “over the years these things accumulated and after I believed, I could see things right back at the beginning, preparing for the stage when I began to search seriously” (298). In *I Am Here*, Avison would again refer to her epiphanic experience as a process involving multiple precedents: “A truer picture was emerging,” she writes. “The truth was given gently: at age forty-five [*sic*], any radical all-at-once revelation might have unbalanced me” (146).<sup>121</sup> Significantly, these narratives also describe her conversion as a process that continued after January 4, 1963: in her interview with Simone, she claims ““It was months before I really knew I was across”” (6); as she tells D.S. Martin, January 4 “was the beginning” (68); and as she writes in *I Am Here*, “The shift in reality, that January 4th morning, was merely a first step, not one I took until the living Jesus drew near, past evading” (146). Avison’s conversion cannot therefore be summed up adequately with reference only to the most extraordinary event in what was clearly a protracted, ongoing process; to focus on this epiphanic experience at the expense of all those experiences that came before and after is (to flash back to

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intend to breach the mysterious doors of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday” (51).

121. Avison provides a similar explanation in her interview with Simone: “She said the process of repentance and discovery through the Bible was a gradual one. ‘The Lord is very gentle and clever. He knew that I would have fallen apart if I had to face that much readjustment all at once’” (“A Religious Experience” 6).

“Voluptuaries”) to risk overvaluing “just a particular instance of / The kind of lighting up of the terrain / That leaves aside the whole terrain, really” (4-6). What is most important for the converted and always-converting Avison, perhaps, is that such an epiphany “signalizes, and compels, an advance” (“Voluptuaries” 7) in what would become a lifelong journey not of secular enlightenment, but of faith.

In Avison’s poetry, one finds that transformation or conversion of the self—the “it” in her religious reworking of Pound’s “make it new”—involves the constant shedding of former selves. This non-Augustinian notion of conversion is present in poetry written shortly after 1963, as well as in subsequent publications. The first stanza of “The Word,” which appears in *The Dumbfounding*, clearly outlines her position:

“*Forsaking all*” – You mean  
head over heels, for good,  
for ever, call of the depths  
of the All – the heart of one  
who creates all, at every  
moment, newly – for  
you do so – and  
to me, far fallen in the  
ashheaps of my  
false-making, burnt-out self and in the  
hosed-down rubble of what my furores  
guttled, or sooted all  
around me – you implore

me to so fall  
in Love, and fall anew in  
ever-new depths of skywashed Love till every  
capillary of your universe  
throbs with your rivering fire? (1-18; emphasis in original)

Although the entire stanza is framed as a question, the speaker's interjection—"for you do so"—renders the previous clause as an assertion; and the question mark registers the speaker's amazement, an effect which paradoxically reinforces our sense of her genuine belief that God is "one / who creates all, at every / moment, newly." Identifying Avison's allusion to God's act of creation in John 1.1-3, Ernest Redekop adds that she "sees this creation as spiritual and continuous, and the speaker in her poem applies this continuing moment to herself" (*Margaret Avison* 114). Redekop seems to have in mind the biblical notion of the "refiner's fire" found in verses such as Job 23.10, Psalms 66.10, Isaiah 48.10, Zechariah 13.9, Malachi 3.3, Matthew 3.10-11, or 1 Peter 1.7: tying together the theme of unceasing creation with the speaker's reference to a "burnt-out self" (10), he goes on to observe that the "rivering fire" (18) with which the stanza concludes "combines the purifying and regenerative qualities of water, fire, and blood" (114-15). And in a similar but bloodless vein, Elizabeth Davey proposes that the poem's alliteration "draw[s] listener and speaker alike into the enchantment of transformation" (16). According to Davey—whose basic thesis is that Avison's poetry is a form of Christian witness—the devotional, meditative act of writing is highly personal yet involves the reader in the process of transformation.

Note too, though, how much attention Avison pays to her former self—the self that has not yet been purified or transformed. This sinful precursor, still in a pupal state, is “far fallen in the / ashheaps of [its] / false-making, burnt-out self” (8-10). This juxtaposition, of old and new, performs an important discursive and theological gesture, not simply an aesthetic one. As Dorsey remarks of conversion narratives (of which Avison’s *The Dumbfounding* could be considered her first), “In either the single- or the multiple-conversion pattern, the overall figuration of self is based on this ‘before and after’ logic. The subject is fundamentally altered, but still rooted in his or her ‘sinful’ history” (36). Although the language of newness is pervasive in this early conversion poem as well as in corresponding prose accounts—for instance, she writes that “the new direction declared itself bit by bit,” and that “a new design had come into [her] life” (*I Am Here* 142)—such texts resemble other Christian narratives of this genre in that a residue of the speaker’s former, sinful self survives and must be repeatedly cast off. In constructivist terms, one might explain the poem’s generic resonances as evidence of what McCutcheon calls “an internalized residue of an earlier social world (its calculus), invented by others . . . that, through the actions of others, has been imprinted on us—or better put, *within* us” (8; emphasis in original); in terms more reflective of Avison’s creative agency, though, one might posit that “The Word” serves as evidence of her dual but interrelated commitments to Christian renewal and the free poetic exploration of metaphysical concerns.

This poetic exploration continues, and the theme of transformation reappears, throughout Avison’s oeuvre. The non-Augustinian theory of conversion to which she appears to have subscribed is supported, again and again, by her poetic praxis, which

emphasizes the Christian's need to simultaneously shed undesirable selves and take on a new identity in Christ: "The beginning of new life, the restoration of flesh and spirit, is through the mortification and death of Christ and the self," writes Redekop of "The Dumbfounding" (*Margaret Avison* 116). In subsequent poems and collections, however, Avison repeatedly shares the same message, perhaps with the Apostle Paul's language of "the old man" and "the new man" in mind (Ephesians 4.20-24).<sup>122</sup> Indeed, many of Avison's post-*Dumbfounding* poems support the idea, which she includes as one of her "Propositions" in *A Kind of Perseverance*, that "*A growing person keeps facing misunderstanding, and keeps breaking through. The old is damaged, but ahead is new understanding—of self or of another*" (20; emphasis in original). In *sunblue* (1978), as in Pratt's 1944 letter to Pincock, the image of "hidden springs" is used as a metaphor for our inner spiritual reservoirs ("Water and Worship" 19),<sup>123</sup> but here these are "waters still acid, / metallic with old wrecks" (20-21)—the wrecks of discarded selves in need of serious restoration. And in "Christmas Doubts Dissolved," from *Not Yet But Still* (1997), the idea of ongoing transformation is highlighted explicitly through the image of the mayfly, an insect whose ephemerality and seemingly impossible rebirth have made it a popular metaphor for Christ's sudden appearance (which Avison renders as "God's little bodily birth" [5]), his brief life on earth ("one flick of time's eternal eye" [9]), and his

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122. Examples of this juxtaposition of old and new selves can be found in "Two Mayday Selves," "Many As Two," and ". . . Person or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost" in *The Dumbfounding*; "Light" and "Oughtiness Ousted" in *sunblue*; and "Relating" and "Rising Dust" in *Concrete and Wild Carrot*. The idea of selves being effaced in light, specifically, may have been influenced by Avison's reading of James 1.17, a verse that resonates in passages from "Voluptuaries and Others" and "Relating."

123. See also "Meeknesses," where Avison writes of "the antecedent hidden springs" (20).

resurrection.<sup>124</sup> The speaker of the poem is left pondering the mystery and miracle of Christ's birth, celebrated every Christmas, which is "for the mayfly, / and for me, so / poignantly permanently new" as a reminder of God's love for all creatures, for "each such 'me'" (16-18, 4). When considered in light of Avison's own transformation, the mayfly metaphor is particularly fitting since, as Dorsey tells us, "conversion narratives often contain a cyclic pattern of conversion and reconversion" (3). The mayfly's ephemerality and cyclic transformations serve as short-hand for her own daily transformations as a Christian, and the poem's Christmas title presumably serves as a tacit reminder of our ongoing need to re-dedicate our lives—however brief—to God.

### **3.4 PERSONAL RELIGION IN THE "POST-CHRISTIAN" ERA**

"Before faith, I thought I knew what a Christian professed, thanks to believing parents, access to a theological library, and years of hearing good preaching. But in my young adult life, doctrine had come to feel like a burdensome harness, hindering free learning and exploring. Therefore when faith was given, after I had returned to taste sermons once again and agreed to read through the Gospel of John, it was simply faith in Jesus."  
(Avison, "A Conversation" 68-69)

One of the apparent problems in discussing how Avison's poetry could be said to resonate with James's notion of personal religion arises from the fact of her close ties to institutional Christianity. On this score alone, it appears rather counterintuitive, at least superficially, to ally her with what Hammond refers to as an "individual-expressive"

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124. Albrecht Dürer's fifteenth-century engraving of *The Holy Family with the Mayfly*, for example, could be considered a precedent for Avison's poem insofar as both Dürer's engraving and Avison's poem associate the baby Jesus, as a symbol of resurrection and spiritual transformation, with the mayfly. No matter that Dürer's engraving is more commonly titled *The Holy Family with the Dragonfly* or *The Holy Family with the Butterfly*: the symbolism works regardless, and Avison's poetry also teems with butterflies, which are obviously another popular symbol of metamorphosis.

culture. But her religious beliefs were “personal” in more than one sense: as I will demonstrate here, her poetry recasts James’s notion of personal religion or unmediated religious experience while simultaneously reinscribing evangelical discourse about “a personal God who cares” (Avison, “Margaret Avison: The dumbfoundling” 3).

Hammond maintains that the third disestablishment and its concomitant shift from a “collective-expressive” to an “individual-expressive” culture entailed “not just the free choice of how to be religious but also the free choice of whether to be religious” (13). Furthermore, he stresses that the kind of “personal autonomy” acting as a “mechanism of the social revolution” in the 1960s and beyond was operative in Canada and in Europe, not just the United States (11). Part of Hammond’s thesis is “that, despite the voluntary character of churchgoing since colonial days, and despite the legal disestablishment of any church in any state since 1833, involvement in church life could be said to have remained normative—and thus ‘established’—for most Americans until the 1960s” (xiv).

However, Avison published the majority of her poetry after the disestablishment of religion had become a reality throughout North America. Once the collective- to individual-expressive shift had taken place on a large scale churchgoing was no longer a necessarily normative social behaviour, so Avison’s conversion, her choice to attend church, and her decision to write poetry incorporating Christian messages and themes at this particular historical moment are significant in socio-cultural as well as religious and aesthetic terms.

Throughout *I Am Here*, Avison paints a picture of what it was like in the 1920s and 1930s, prior to the third disestablishment: in line with the general narrative constructed by Hammond, or by John Webster Grant and Reginald Bibby in the Canadian

context, she says it was “a time when most people had been automatic churchgoers” (141). By contrast, her faith is individual-expressive, and she retrospectively claims to have admired, from an early age, those churchgoers who were “there because they wanted to be there, singing the hymns with their hearts in it” (31). She reflects that, before her conversion—or even before she started attending Knox Presbyterian Church in the late 1950s—the “new breed” of believers she saw entering Knox was “unlike the United Church faithful I remembered from my father’s church thirty years earlier”; and she confesses that “the idea of a stalwart minority, be the current culture what it may, became intriguing” (141). Hammond avers that, in this kind of disestablishment milieu, “Increased personal autonomy also permits persons to choose to be *more* involved” in institutional forms of religion (16; emphasis in original). To paraphrase “Watershed” from *Winter Sun*, one could now choose to regulate one’s life according to the subjective, Bergsonian (im)pulses of “The clocks in the wrists” or the more regulated, metronomic beat of “the temples” (8)—whether “temples” signifies institutional religion or is a metonymic reference to human reason. The speaker’s description of the moment when “you know in your heart that the foot-hold really is gone” (10) prefigures Avison’s later assertion, in *I Am Here*, that the conditions of modern life had “undermined the careful structures we had inherited, which home and church had reinforced for me” (62-63).

Paradoxically, Avison’s turn to Christianity can therefore be read as an assertion of independence, even an act of rebellion; her faith was not merely inherited, but the product of an individual-expressive choice. Containing none of the “faddy enthusiasm” that had made her father wary of certain strains of evangelicalism, her later Presbyterianism, though evangelical in many respects, is an example of the kind of



“solid, considered faith” she respected in others (*I Am Here* 132). Ironically, too, both her rejection of and her return to Christianity can be considered acts of rebellion: her adolescent turn away from Christianity was a turn away from an inherited faith that was expected of her in a pre-third disestablishment era of “automatic churchgoers” (141), and her conversion occurred at a time when church attendance was in decline and Christianity had become just one religious choice among many. Yet, while Avison makes multiple references to her rebellious streak, in neither of the above instances of rebellion was her decision so radical or counter-cultural as to alienate her entirely. For example, in *I Am Here*’s account of her adolescence, she deploys her flâneuse-like habit of strolling as a metaphor to describe her early attempts not only “to walk off [her] fat,” but also “to shed, temporarily, the self defined by family, school, home neighbourhood, and so on” (51-52). Her emphasis on the word “temporarily” indicates that she was aware, at least retrospectively, that primary groups (such as “family” and “school”) inevitably shaped and constrained her identity—just as in poetry she was aware that free verse is never entirely free, that, despite appearances, all poetry is shaped by “constraints, rhythms, consonant patters, echoes, stresses that fall as the meaning dictates, etc.” (“The Quiet Centre” 166). Like Hammond, and like the constructivists, she understood that identities are molded by social, cultural, and religious inheritances, regardless of our individual-expressive desires to fashion new identities outside of institutional and social frameworks. And while her return to Christianity may have taken place in a post-Christian disestablishment climate, she remarks of her experience of the celebrated 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference that the prevailing atmosphere of openness and freedom actually “made for a surprising receptivity” to all kinds of religious ideas, even those

discarded by many of her contemporaries: to the forty-four-year-old Avison, who had recently converted to Christianity and was “not equipped to defend the faith,” the audience—studded with literary celebrities Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and Irving Layton—“seemed friendly” (146).<sup>125</sup>

The question of Avison’s “difficulty,” which has been considered a hallmark of her style by critics from Aide to Zezulka,<sup>126</sup> has traditionally concentrated attention on her neologisms and compound phrases, her syntactical inversions, and her penchant for metaphysical puzzles. Still, given the post-Christian climate discussed above, one might reasonably add that some of Avison’s poetry reads either as difficult or, conversely, as the “uninventive illustration of Biblical themes” (Willmot 116), because of a general decline in biblical literacy resulting from Christianity’s gradual disestablishment; that is, readers’ ignorance of the biblical allusions or theological riddles contained in her poetry has resulted in the glossing over of the nuances and tensions that are—for critics such as Aide, William Butt, and Elizabeth Davey—the source of her poetry’s power. As Leonard Diepeveen explains in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, difficulty in modernist literature “is not merely a classifiable set of techniques. . . . Difficulty must be understood in terms of a reading process, and it manifests itself socially; modernism begins with a typical

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125. Avison adds that, in a conversation with Ginsberg following her poetry reading—which included several overtly religious pieces from what would become *The Dumbfounding*—she “felt that he had received my reading with a generous heart” (*I Am Here* 146). For more on the Vancouver Poetry Conference and Avison’s experience of this event, see Jason Wiens’s “Avison and the Postmodern 1960s.”

126. Avison’s reputation as a “difficult” poet initially developed in response to the poems published in, or prior to, *Winter Sun*, although the critical response to subsequent collections continued to affirm this general consensus. Even so, it is worth reprinting Kent’s caveat here: “The difficult Avison may be the most notorious, but it is not the only Avison” (*Margaret Avison* 20).

interaction between art and its audience” (xi). If one accepts this definition, Avison’s poetry may be considered difficult not only because of its formally challenging properties, but insofar as it demands biblical and theological literacy of what she believes to have been an increasingly post-Christian reading public.<sup>127</sup> Yet David A. Kent notes that Avison knew “too strident a statement of Christian commitment would diminish an already fragmented audience. She sensed that we no longer live in a ‘coherent’ society. When more people know about karma than about Christ, she told me, there is a barrier to communication—‘Some things are not heard’” (“Foreword” viii-ix). Equally pertinent here, then, is Avison’s sense that “too strident a statement of Christian commitment” could result not only in difficult poetry, but in poetry blemished by overt preaching and “moralizing tags in the last line or two of a poem” (Avison, “A Conversation” 338).<sup>128</sup> In the former case, as summarized by Kent, difficulty becomes “a barrier to communication” because the reader cannot fill in the text’s aporetic spaces and thus satisfactorily “complete” a poem in a manner consistent with Avison’s understanding of the reading process;<sup>129</sup> in the latter, “too strident a statement of Christian commitment”

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127. Aide supports Avison’s claim about her reading public, as well as my own claim about her poetry’s difficulty on the same grounds, when he writes: “Many of the poems in *sunblue* are responses to different portions of scripture, and biblical literacy, like musical literacy, is not socially wide enough to make a gloss on either scriptural passage or the Grosse Fuge sufficient to strike resonance” (70).

128. Avison is similarly critical of her poetry’s occasional tendency towards proselytism in “The Quiet Centre” (168) and *I Am Here* (156). Numerous examples of poems ending with “moralizing tags” can be found in her poetry, but they are perhaps most frequent, and most conspicuous, in *sunblue* (see, for instance, “Dryness and Scorch of Ahab’s Evil Rule”).

129. Avison sees writing as a process that involves the reader as a partner in the construction and communication of meaning: as she remarks in her interview with Martin, “It isn’t a poem until it is received. It’s important to find the person to receive it and get beyond being your own private poet” (“A Conversation” 66). Particularly in cases involving encounters with “difficult” authors such as Eliot, Avison notes that considerable work is required if the reader is “to penetrate to the essential worth” of a

results in didactic, dogmatic poetry that is neither difficult nor interesting, since readers are told how and what to think.

Not all of Avison's "Christian" poetry is didactic, however, and there are many continuities between her pre- and post-1963 writings. After *Winter Sun*, for example, Avison's individual-expressive poetry continued to embrace wordplay in order to breathe new life into language or, in certain cases, to counter occasional lapses into religious didacticism. Part of this process of making her faith—and her language—her own involved etymological exploration: in *A Kind of Perseverance*, she explains how she made a conscious attempt to scrutinize words such as "evil," for example, as a way of reconciling herself to them and making them living, powerful, and relevant once again (39-40).<sup>130</sup> By holding words up for examination in this methodical manner (Butt maintains that "Avison can split words open too, as physicists split atoms" [843]), Avison is working towards a religious as well as an aesthetic end: while reversing the process of stagnation or *Veralltäglichung* ("banalization") that James and Max Weber associate with the institutionalization of religion (Taylor, *Varieties of Religion* 19), she is also heeding Percy Bysshe Shelley's call for poets to counter the processes by which words have "become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thought, instead of pictures of integral thoughts" ("Defence" 78). That she was successful in revitalizing language in such a manner is suggested by her critics' recognition of what Starnino calls "Avison's gift for making clapped-out diction potent again" (144). But in *Concrete and Carrot's*

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given text ("Turning New Leaves" 283); however, while this kind of reading may be "a chore," she maintains that "the final discovery makes the labor itself a kind of pleasure" (283).

130. Avison also engages in etymological exploration in her poetry. "Misconstruing," from the posthumous collection *Listening: Last Poems* (2009), is a particularly good example of her intense curiosity about the origins and polysemous nature of words.

“Uncircular,” it is implied that her poetic efforts in this direction are also modelled on Christ’s own efforts to get to the true heart of religion: “Among us,” she writes, “Jesus found / encrusted words and structures; / he washed and brushed them clean” (167). Even so, in a later meta-poetic moment from the same poem, Avison articulates her belief that only God is capable of language impervious to the process of banalization:

. . . Jesus too found  
words twisted, rubble about, and  
again he swept and tended them  
gently, almost smiling  
when some who so cherished  
the traditional that they urged  
stains, gritty particles, dust  
must be left, too, untouched.  
His words flowed from a  
clear wellspring always till now  
a little tainted by the  
hand that cupped to drink, or the  
crafted ladle. (168-69)

Christ’s language has been “tainted” throughout the course of history, in the process of its cooptation by institutional religion and uncompromising lovers of “the traditional.”

However, Avison appears mindful of the fact that writing in this religious mode necessarily involves serving up Christ’s “clear” message using the contrived, “crafted ladle” that is her poetry.

Yet, once again, she is determined to revitalize “encrusted words and structures” (167) as best she can, and it is in this spirit that her occasional feminist readings of biblical stories, Christianity, or of society more generally operate most effectively—that is, by bringing religion, with its accumulations of “stains, gritty particles, dust” (168), to bear on modern life. Despite Elizabeth Davey’s unequivocal claim that “[Avison’s] body of poetry is conspicuously silent on issues of gender inequality and lack of women’s opportunity for expression and advancement” (xv), poems such as “Jael’s Part,” “For Tinkers Who Travel on Foot,” “A Women’s Poem: Now,” “A Women’s Poem: Then and Now,” and “Lemmings” suggest otherwise. Read cumulatively and in light of Avison’s holistic understanding of the Christian life, such poems make Christ’s teachings new by defamiliarizing popular Bible characters or by gently challenging the patriarchal structures and modes of “self-writing” (Dorsey 6) that have typically governed the reception and circulation of religious texts of various kinds.

More obviously, perhaps, Avison’s poetry is personal in the Jamesian sense because of its frequent jettisoning of institutional religion’s trappings and “secondary growths” (qtd. in Richardson 406). In “A Basis,” one of Avison’s rare poems about the Christian church as institution, she ventriloquizes James, proposing that “the saint’s propulsive / fire in the bones, although operative / in followers now” (23-25), will inevitably cool as the process of institutionalization sets in. Referring to the early Christian believers, she foreshadows claims made in “Uncircular,” as quoted above, by implying that God’s message was “mistranslated in some of their hearts” (35). Furthermore, as in Pratt’s poetry, the cross—not the church or church doctrine—is the metonymic focal point of much of Avison’s writing. She tells Martin that, “in [her] young

adult life, doctrine had come to feel like a burdensome harness, hindering free learning and exploring” (68); “when faith was given,” she continues, “it was simply faith in Jesus” (69). Again, her poetry supports this claim: in “The Bible to Be Believed,” for example, she expresses her desire—inspired by Jesus’s message and ministry—to move “beyond old rites or emblem burial” (23); church doctrine and ceremony is of secondary importance in her religious hierarchy. Even “doves” and “lambs” (22), some of the things routinely sacrificed to God in the Old Testament, are now “cherishe[d]” (21) as objects of inherent rather than symbolic worth.

In *No Time*’s six-part cycle entitled “My Mother’s Death,” the poet also alludes to Pratt’s “temple” and “cave” (“From Stone to Steel” 13) as it contrasts the efficacy of individual convictions and connections with those provided either by religious or health-care institutions. The cycle opens with the assertion that

Institutionalized love  
is not in the end  
especially  
love (171)

before pointing to Christ (“person waiting” [171]) as the ultimate embodiment of divine love. By part four, “Hospital Death,” the clinical setting is important only as a metaphorical springboard for Avison’s ruminations on the religious significance of her mother’s final moments:

Dark. All alone and dying,  
two hours, and no one there.  
But the flags of dawn were flying.

The chandeliers of prayer  
seem sure behind cold temples or  
the cavernous mouth even.

It is remote – that heaven  
comforters evoke,  
but your last sleep is given  
to One I know awake. (174)

Given that she was one of Pratt's former students, and given the popularity of Pratt's "From Stone to Steel," it seems likely that Avison created this allusion intentionally, equally tempted (as she had been in "Watershed" almost thirty years earlier) by the punning potential of the word "temple." The poem's speaker derives comfort from a personal relationship ("your last sleep is given / to One I know awake") and from her sense of her mother's personal religious convictions ("The chandeliers of prayer / seem sure"), not from the unfeeling façade of institutional religion's "cold temples" or from spiritual platitudes about the afterlife casually shared by well-meaning visitors ("It is remote – that heaven / comforters evoke"). The warmth of "chandeliers," reminiscent of "the saint's propulsive / fire in the bones" ("A Basis" 23-24), contrasts with the "cold temples" and the cooling "cave" of the dying mother's "mouth"; and whereas the "One I know awake" is described in intimate terms, "that heaven / comforters evoke" is both "remote" and impersonal.

In other writings, too, examples abound of Avison critiquing those aspects of religion she deems "cold" and "remote" from the vagaries of human experience: in her



autobiography, for instance, she takes explicit aim at religious strictures, legalistic interpretations of scripture, and the attitudes of “old-timers who may have accepted formulated doctrines too long to think them through,” pitting “living faith” as an antidote against such tendencies and flaws (171).<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, on the whole, Avison’s writings do not evince an attitude of hostility towards institutional religion so much as they do an understanding—in line with much anti-foundational modernist thinking—that all institutions are flawed in some way (*I Am Here* 59-60). While she complains in “Seer, Seeing” that “Our ‘world’ still has / palaces, malls, temples, do-goodery / and make-goodery – institutionalized” (60), and that “Institutions have all the words, but / there’s not an institution speaks for / you, or for me hearkening for you” (60), this is Avison at the height of her iconoclasm. As well, in this instance, her playful re-writing of Pound’s famous “Canto LXXXI” exhortations to “pull down” (541) as “Tear down / Tear down” (61) reveals more about her socio-economic than her religious concerns.

Avison’s writing is also emphatically “personal” because of its reliance on contemporary evangelical discourse of a “personal God” or of one’s “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Of course, the idea of a personal God was not new within Protestantism or even Christianity generally, although existing evangelical discourse about “personal faith” or a “personal Jesus” became newly relevant in the anti-establishment climate of the 1960s. Avison’s poetry, which values the Person of Christ over the institution of Christianity, reflects aspects of this culture; however, it has little in common with the “faith in faith” (Hungerford 3) or “religion-in-general” (Hammond

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131. See also *I Am Here* (96-97, 186).

xiii)<sup>132</sup> rampant in the period. Like Pratt's poetry, Avison's has a definite object: Christ. Indeed, each collection after *Winter Sun* highlights Christ's divinity as well as his humanity, portraying him as accessible, compassionate, as an intimate friend, or even as a lover.<sup>133</sup> This motif has not been lost on Avison's critics, either. Redekop was speaking for many critics both before and after him when he stated that, in *The Dumbfounding*, Avison is "creating poems that are usually deeply personal expressions of the speaker's relation to God or Christ" (*Margaret Avison* 109). What is more, her desire to humanize God, "to know Him better as Person" ("The Quiet Centre" 169), is one that correlates with her persistent desire to understand others and overcome differences of perspective.<sup>134</sup>

But Avison's poetry also foregrounds the idea that God wants to get to know us better as human beings—hence its frequent references to Jesus as the Person-ification of God on earth. This biblical trope of knowing, of God's intimate and personal knowledge of all creation,<sup>135</sup> shows up in Avison's poetry immediately after her 1963 conversion, as is evident in *The Dumbfounding's* ". . . Person; or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost" but also, twelve years later, in *sunblue's* "Psalm 80: 1 – 'Thou that dwellest between the

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132. Hammond uses this phrase in his summary of Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955), which he credits as one of the earliest studies responsible for "identifying the religion-in-general then approved by most Americans" (xiii).

133. Examples of Avison's many poems emphasizing the idea of a personal God, or of Christ as a friend, family member, or lover, include "Person," "Person; or A Hymn on and to the Holy Ghost," "The Word," "Hope" "Christmas: Becoming," "The Jo Poems," "The Familiar Friend, But by the Ottawa River," "Confrontation and Resolution, in *Job*," and "Enter, Within." While far from exhaustive, this list is representative of Avison's body of work across a period of more than forty years.

134. See, for example, "Turning New Leaves" (283-84) or *Perseverance* (48-50).

135. See, for example, Genesis 1.31, Psalm 95.3-5, Jeremiah 1.5, Matthew 10.29, Luke 12.6, and 1 John 4.10.

cherubim, shine forth!” and “Oughtiness Ousted.” In the latter poem, Avison acknowledges that

God (being good) has let me know  
no good apart from Him.  
He, knowing me, yet promised too  
all good in His good time. (1-4)

In just four lines, Avison illuminates multiple facets of her personal relationship with God, including how God has communicated directly with her (God “has let [her] know” and has “promised too”), how she is dependent on God, since there is “no good apart from Him,” and how God knows her as an individual (“He, knowing me”).

Significantly, however, her emphasis on God’s intimate love does not mean she treats religion as a cure-all for the world’s woes. In her religious worldview, as in orthodox Christianity’s, God’s incarnation in the Person of Jesus involves sacrifice, as does adherence to the Christian way of life. Avison, alluding to the paradox of Jesus’s suffering as the route to salvation, explains that God alone can simultaneously occupy the “timeless There” of a transcendental reality and yet be “here in soil and hurt” (“Don’t Touch the Glory” 28). In the words of W.B. Yeats’s *Crazy Jane*, “Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement” (15-16). Redekop observes a similar movement in Avison’s “The Christian’s Year in Miniature”; he asserts, quite justifiably, that “the contemporaneity of Christ underlies her whole religious vision: ‘From the timeless verge / you moved, to our *now*’” (*Margaret Avison* 128; emphasis in original). But this religious vision would continue to inform Avison’s poetry for decades, as Redekop intuitively follows. Following the publication of *sunblue*, he would follow up his earlier claim by

noting that almost half of the poems in Avison's most recent collection were "explicitly devotional": of these, "All express a profoundly personal response to Christ, often in images of Incarnation, Communion, Passion and Resurrection" ("sun/Son" 24-25). In other words, Christ's incarnation is—as John 3:16 indicates—intimately bound up with suffering. And Avison works through this theological riddle on numerous other occasions, in both prose and poetry: grappling with theodicy in *I Am Here*, for example, Avison imagines that "An omniscient God comprehends, encompasses, the evil as well as the good, but, unlike us, He knows how and at what moment to cope without interfering with our interim strategies, or our shared responsibility for most of them!" (155-56); and in "Betrayed into Glory (John 13:32)," she accepts her flawed "interim strategies" as part of God's plan for her life, concluding, "The troubled way I went / is what He meant!" (27-28). Throughout Avison's writing but particularly in poems such as this, God repeatedly enters history, moving from the "timeless There" ("Don't Touch the Glory" 28) or "the timeless verge" to our broken "here and now" ("The Christian's Year in Miniature" 15-16).

That Avison would stress God's immanence is significant for another reason, as well. By locating God in the natural world, and by forcing the deistic "Immanent Will" of Thomas Hardy's (or Pratt's earliest) poetry into a sympathetic human frame, she seems to actively respond to Nietzsche's critique of Christianity—namely, its neoplatonic deferral of perfection and bliss into a transcendental future. Rod Willmot writes that "Cracking out the immanent seems to be Avison's special poetic task" (116), and this task allies her with a widespread movement, taking place within Christianity but increasingly without, that attempted to re-enchant the postwar world and rediscover the sacred. Her verse

celebrates creation as a source of joy, despite the Nietzschean echo one finds in her early poem “The Mirrored Man”:

We always turn our heads away  
When Canaan is at hand,  
Knowing it mortal to enjoy  
The Promise, not the Land. (9-12)

In this reading of the Exodus, the speaker and her interlocutors appear to have inherited the Israelites’ taste for the neoplatonic world of shadows—or at least their inability to “enjoy” what “is at hand” because of their anticipation of what could be, or what is yet to come. While in other poems Avison seems to unwittingly fall into this trap of deferral herself,<sup>136</sup> the “We” and the “always” above speak to her awareness of this human tendency. As her later poetry makes clear, the solution to this problem is to strike a balance between an immanent and transcendental conception of God, looking to Christ as the “node” (“Prospecting” 1-3, 22-26) or “essential / pivot” (“On a Maundy Thursday Walk” 42-43)<sup>137</sup> between the binaries of “here” and “there” or “now” and “then” that are so central in so much of her poetry. To repurpose a phrase from *Concrete and Carrot’s* “Other Oceans,” Christ is, throughout Avison’s oeuvre, the Person of the Trinity who

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136. In later poems such as *Not Yet But Still’s* “Sultry Day,” Avison plays into Nietzsche’s critique by using proleptic language:

Then, with the soiled old world  
hosed clean, the blue  
windows of light will be  
clear, the air  
cedar-tip sweet. (13-17)

The poem, which opens in the imperfect present (“It smells like glue” [1]; “We do keep breathing / through this vile air” [5-6]), suggests that readers—the “We” implicated in the poem by the speaker—will have to wait until an unknown future date to experience creation in its perfect state.

clearly and consistently represents “the holy / vanishing point” (149) between innumerable such oppositions, offering hope of the “far-off” (149) while enriching the here and now of everyday human existence.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

Of course, to read Avison’s poetry merely as the textual record of a personal journey of faith would be to minimize her accomplishments in speaking not only to the lived realities of believers and non-believers, but also to the wide range of discursive contexts to which her writing responded over a period of more than sixty years. In her conversion narratives in particular, modernist and evangelical Christian discourses of the new are inextricably tied to aesthetic and religious concerns about the act of self-narration. Her ongoing conversion is in many respects a repeated turn away from private imagery and a poetics of impersonality towards a personalizing poetics of listening and reconciliation. However, this turn is a complicated gesture for Avison the poet as well as Avison the believer.

As Rodger M. Payne notes of conversion narratives, the more one writes about one’s private religious experiences the more one comes up against what he calls “the paradox of the self” (15): “The evangelical morphology of conversion required that converts speak a language of self-negation,” he observes, “but evangelical autobiographers struggled with the irony that the more they spoke the expected language, the more self-focused and even self-creative their narratives became” (33-34). This paradox of the self is all the more noteworthy in Avison because of how seriously she

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137. See also Elizabeth Davey’s discussion of “the motif of pivots” (153) for her usage of

took to heart the advice of Gladys Story, the high school teacher and poetry club leader who, in 1931, wrote: “For ten years I would like you to write nothing using the first person” (qtd. in Avison, “A Conversation” 75). As Avison would cautiously remark over seventy years later, despite having already written some very personal poetry in the interim, “I think ‘I’ could come back into my poetry more now. But still on the whole it was very sound advice. If you feel, you should feel for the people out there to whom you’re writing, as well as for yourself” (“A Conversation” 75).<sup>138</sup> In this latter comment, she effectively summarizes the crux of Payne’s paradox of the self, as well as her own reticence. For Avison, the “I” voice was to be employed judiciously because it could lead to indulgent forms of poetic and religious expression; she felt it was commonly misused in what she pejoratively referred to as “therapeutic writing” (“Spirit” 31; “So Many Years” 117). While Avison’s own poetry was emphatically personal, as I have demonstrated above in various ways, it was a dimension of her faith she was willing to share, and it had little or nothing to do with self-indulgence and self-promotion.

Instead, Avison’s most personal poetry is often the poetry that gestures most clearly towards the importance of humbling oneself before God and others, of bridging interpersonal divides. Particularly after the publication of *Winter Sun* and her exposure to Christianity, she struggled to eschew the prohibitively personal and be seen as more than a difficult or esoteric poet: as Jeffrey notes, “The problem she sees in her earlier intellectual and spiritual life is a subversive lack of any transpersonal reference for ultimate meaning – implicitly a tendency to solipsism, a subjectivism which localizes all

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this term in other poems and other contexts.

138. Avison has told the same story elsewhere, such as in the foreword to the first volume of *Always Now* (14) and in *I Am Here*, where she claims she “had radar out against using [‘I’ or ‘me’] for any self-indulgent reason” (54).

reference in the self while imagining otherwise” (66). Yet Avison would discover multiple means of transcending the personal: by framing the act of reading as a form of dialogue or collaboration, by exploring new ways of listening, and by continually striving to overcome differences in perspective, acting with sympathy and love for others—all gestures featured prominently in her poetry, her prose, and Avison criticism.<sup>139</sup> Her pre-conversion critique of Eliot—on the basis of his apparent unwillingness to understand other experiences and viewpoints—remains equally relevant to her Christian life and writing, too, since in *A Kind of Perseverance* and much of her poetry, listening to others and overcoming differences is a religious as well as an aesthetic imperative. In 1951, at least, she seems to have preferred Pound: she argues that “one’s final feeling is that [Pound] privately delights in the uniqueness of every man, even the man he has just lambasted. But with Eliot, the feeling is rather that he is irritated by other people’s otherness” (“Turning New Leaves” 284). To the extent that she is correct about Eliot, her critique marks what is, for her, perhaps the key difference between these two poets; regardless of its accuracy,<sup>140</sup> however, it also points to one of the most striking

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139. The motif of listening features prominently in Avison’s poetry (see, for example, “A Parallels Poem: Hearing,” “Proving,” “Priorities and Perspective,” and “Confrontation and Resolution, in *Job*”), prose (particularly “Who Listens and How Come?” and *Perseverance*), and in the writings of scholars such as Starnino (143) and Elizabeth Davey (39, 176-77, 277-78). Avison’s ecumenism—inherited from her parents, and evident in autobiographical texts such as “Margaret Avison’s Voice” (300), “Spirit” (31), and *I Am Here* (42, 63)—exemplifies her willingness to listen and learn from others. Moreover, this ecumenical impulse demonstrates that, while Avison’s beliefs may have been evangelical, they were certainly not fundamentalist, if one follows Robert Choquette’s definition of fundamentalist Christianity in terms of its uncompromising sectarianism (315).

140. Contrary to Avison, James Longenbach alleges that “Eliot’s ideas about an ‘impersonal’ theory of poetry did not prevent him from understanding the importance of personality” (255). What is more, Eliot’s claim in *The Sacred Wood* that the creative process requires “a continual extinction of personality” (qtd. in Longenbach 255)



similarities between Avison and James, who is said to have remarked, “What most horrifies me in life is our brutal ignorance of one another” (qtd. in Richardson 381). This sentiment is really the thesis for much of Avison’s writing, either before or after her adoption of Christianity, although she tended to frame it not as a negative statement about the human condition, as James does here, but rather as one of the qualities James attributes to saints, for whom “the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down” (*Varieties* 273).

Critical interest in Avison’s poetry has not waned as her centenary approaches. In fact, the imminent arrival of a special issue of *Canadian Poetry* dedicated to her life and writing testifies to her continuing influence and appeal. However, it remains to be seen whether Avison’s critics will do more to listen both to her distinct poetic voice and to the ways in which her writing carries the indelible marks of evangelical discourse of conversion and the personal—as part and parcel of, rather than antithetical to, her literary modernist practice. As I have argued here, Avison’s poetry collectively serves as a kind of protracted conversion narrative in which she reproduces and reworks various aspects of modernist and evangelical rhetoric. And while her autobiographical acts helped her make her faith her own, her participation in the shift from collective- to individual-expressive religion and her articulation of her faith in personal rather than institutional terms paradoxically signal her participation in growing trends in North American religion, as well as her embeddedness in a literary milieu increasingly caught between a New Critical poetics of impersonality—passed on from Eliot to A.J.M. Smith and other

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resonates with Avison’s orthodox Christian understanding of Christians’ ongoing need to shed past selves.

gate-keepers of Canadian modernism<sup>141</sup>—and the incipient strains of confessional, subjective, or occasionally “therapeutic” poetries that would gain ground in the postwar period.

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141. See Trehearne for a more detailed account of this shift (“Afterword” 441).

## **CHAPTER 4: “THE IDEA OF GOD”: LOUIS DUDEK AS RELIGIOUS POET**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

On a superficial level, at least, the story of Louis Dudek’s relationship to religion might be read as the story of North America’s relationship to religion in miniature. The plot-points are all too familiar: like E.J. Pratt, Margaret Avison, and millions of other North Americans, Dudek was born into a Christian home and thoroughly internalized his community’s “collective-expressive” values (Hammond 13). However, he soon began to wrestle with the faith he had inherited; like Avison—who was, incidentally, also born in 1918—Dudek would renounce his faith as a teenager, distancing himself from the Roman Catholicism of his Polish immigrant parents. As Dudek explains, “I was conscious of the incompatibility between natural sexual demands and the religious conception of sin; practical reason and scientific theory (evolution, geology, natural law) became my battering rams against religion” (Autobiographical Sketch” 311). This emblem of teenage angst and apostasy could easily be placed alongside Stephen Dedalus as proof of modern literature’s inevitable secularization; in any case, with very little effort, one could reconcile this generalized figure of Dudek-the-lapsed-Catholic with that of the mature and sceptical poet who, more than fifty years later, would write that “God is merely an idea” (*Continuation II* 63).

But there is a problem with this narrative: namely, there are other possible narratives; there are, were, and can be many Dudeks, as Brian Trehearne has observed (*Montreal Forties* 282). The Dudek with whom most readers and critics are familiar, of

course, is the defender of the arts who would go on to become “a man of letters” (W. Francis 20) and occasional pen-pal of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and other literary giants; he is also the editor of multiple journals and presses, such as *First Statement* (1942-45) and *Delta* (1957-66); a “pioneer of the Canadian modernist long poem” (Trehearne, “Louis Dudek” 289); a co-editor of *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (1967), which left an indelible mark on Canada’s literary-critical landscape; and, through his own poetry and criticism, arguably “Canada’s most important—that is to say, consequential—modern voice” (Blaser 9). Each of these portraits is valid, reflecting a different aspect of Dudek’s identity. Yet the Dudek who wrote “God is merely an idea” would qualify his statement with the Jamesian line, “but we have to live by our idea” [*Continuation II* 63]), and indeed, a significant percentage of Dudek’s poetry and criticism was dedicated to the pragmatic consequences of the idea of God or of religious belief as a subject worthy of serious attention.

Surprisingly, however, few critics seem familiar with, or interested in, Dudek as a poet of religious significance: none of Dudek’s critics have discussed his religious concerns at great length or in a particularly precise manner. For good reason, critics such as Frank Davey, Ken Norris, Susan Stromberg-Stein, Trehearne, and Karis Shearer have identified Dudek “as a significant bridge between two generations of Canadian poets: modernist and postmodern writers” (Shearer ix). In this chapter, I will make similar claims but with reference to Dudek’s ideas about God. To this end, I will examine his notions about the pragmatic stakes of religious belief, but I will also show how his own religious convictions serve to bridge the gap between the Christian Canada of Pratt’s time

and the post-Christian climate of Avison's, or, more broadly, between the various kinds of religious and secular imaginaries operative in twentieth-century literature.

Curiously, Dudek's attitudes towards the idea of God appear to align him with a modernist poet for whom he had little respect: Wallace Stevens. In fact, Matthew Mutter's "Wallace Stevens, Analogy, and Tautology: The Problem of a Secular Poetics," which analyzes Stevens's multiple responses to the apparent death of God, provides an invaluable interpretive framework within which the ambiguities and apparent contradictions of Dudek's poetry and philosophy of religion are clarified. The main components of this framework are outlined in a crucial letter from Stevens to a friend, Henry Church: "The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary" (qtd. in Mutter 743). Stevens suggests here that the replacement of religious with secular imaginaries involves three possible strategies, which Mutter labels "adaptation, substitution, and elimination" (743). Borrowing these terms, I will contend that, like Stevens's poems, Dudek's many poems, manifestos, and essays "probe the difficulties that inhere in each strategy" (Mutter 743). Like Stevens, Dudek considers each strategy from multiple angles, and with great seriousness, so that his writing—if broken up into decontextualized fragments from multiple sources—sometimes appears to advance contradictory arguments. Nevertheless, the results of each poet's personal efforts to sublimate religion's concepts and language in poetry varied tremendously. On one hand, Dudek closely echoes Stevens in his recognition of the significance, for poetry, of secularization

(“the movement away from the idea of God”): Dudek writes, “We are living in a secular culture; that is the key. And we have been living in an increasingly secular culture since the beginning of the Renaissance. All the modern problems of art and culture stem from this fact” (“Reality in the Arts” 4).<sup>142</sup> On the other hand, Dudek had little interest in Stevens as a poetic model: he referred to Stevens as an aesthete engaged in mere “Playful fantasy” (*Notebooks* 20) and, later, as “a burbling geyser of warm sentimental verbiage” (*Notebooks* 213). Accordingly, in what follows, I draw on Stevens’s interpretive framework—as presented by Mutter—but focus primarily on how Dudek wrestled with the problem of religion in his own way, and with reference to other poets and intellectuals.

In an essay on T.S. Eliot, Dudek would also dismiss other poets’ religious strategies, including the conservative return-to-religion model embraced by figures such as Avison and Eliot. “The return to orthodoxy” was, in Dudek’s mind, “a doubtful possibility” (*First Person* 56),<sup>143</sup> as was W.B. Yeats’s turn “to spiritism and neo-Platonism, of the mystical, other-than-this variety” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 175). To Dudek, Eliot’s Christian God and Yeats’s arcane, transcendental ideals were both detached from the realities of everyday existence. But he had even less patience for those who denied religion its place altogether by adopting what Mutter calls a strategy of “elimination” (743). While he consistently railed against Eliot’s conservatism and the puritanical religion of his own youth, neither was he satisfied with their extreme opposite:

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142. Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-0167 1990-07, “Series 4. Writing,” “Sub-series F. Articles,” Box 50, File 7, typescript, undated. Materials from the Louis Dudek fonds are quoted here with the permission of Dudek’s literary executor, Gregory Dudek.

the kind of hedonistic secularism he felt was typified by much postmodernist art and popular culture. As his essay “Arts, Entertainment and Religion” usefully articulates, his intense, infamous dislike of popular culture can be explained in religious terms as a rejection of nihilistic despair and negation of meaning.<sup>144</sup> In part, his responses to the problems posed both by the strictures of institutional religion and by the groundlessness of contemporary culture were made possible by the strategies of substitution and adaptation that Mutter describes. To an extent, then, Dudek was simply adapting existing strategies deployed by writers such as Blake, Whitman, Nietzsche, Pound, D.H. Lawrence, or existentialists such as Camus, whom he believed “point[ed] to some individual radical secular approach to life, some grasp of the realities, whether tragic or hopeful, which stands in contrast to orthodoxy and to the morality of the past” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 177). Each of these intellectuals offered “an affirmation” of some kind, whether of nature or of the “emotions and appetites” (177) censured by the Catholic Church of Dudek’s youth. As I argue below, however, Dudek would attempt to forge his own path, and he would do so not by joining such luminaries “outside the pale of religion,” but rather by formulating and refining his own “radically revised religion” (175) through his criticism and through long poems such as *Europe* (1954), *En México* (1958), *Atlantis* (1967), and *Continuation* (1971-2000).<sup>145</sup> Of these latter texts, I will pay

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143. See also Dudek’s 7 Nov. 2000 letter to Ruiz Sánchez, where he posits that “T.S. Eliot’s solution was an arbitrary return to Anglican Christianity” (qtd. in Ruiz Sánchez 88).

144. In his poetry, Dudek’s disdain for this nihilistic form of postmodernist culture can be summed up in a passage from *Atlantis* in which the speaker laments how, in modern society, “we don’t want to think / about lost beauty, or nobility, or love, or belief, / nor even of the possibility of these things” (60). Voicing his opposition to this culture of negation, he later affirms, “Love leads us on. And beauty” (141).

145. For a detailed description of *Continuation*’s publication history, see Jensen (“An ‘Architecture of Contradictions’” 54).

particular attention to *Atlantis* as the breakthrough poem in which Dudek's inextricably linked obsessions with art, religion, and reality begin to find their fullest and most positive expression as he systematically weighs each of the strategies identified by Stevens.

In the first section of this chapter, I claim that Dudek was a deeply religious poet, if idiosyncratically so; the idea of God or ultimate reality, which is repeatedly represented in his writing by the transcendental symbol of "Atlantis," is an absolutely vital aspect of his poetry and poetics. Again, Dudek was highly distrustful of religion in its institutional and particularly its most puritanical forms—a fact underscored by the handwritten notes and markings in his personal copy of James's *Varieties*.<sup>146</sup> This anti-institutional bias informs the second section of this chapter, in which I consider Dudek's reflections on churchgoing and churchgoers in relation to Stevens's strategy of elimination. However, it is perhaps James's inclusive definition of religion that most strikingly casts Dudek's ideas about reality and civilization in a religious light. James "arbitrarily" glosses religion as "*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (*Varieties* 31; emphasis in original); he provides an equally capacious description of

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146. This item can be found in Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University's McLennan Library. Dudek's Collier Books edition of James's text was published in 1961, the same year Dudek started to write *Atlantis*. Some evidence that Dudek was likely reading *Varieties* during the period in which he was also writing *Atlantis* comes in the form of a piece of paper that Dudek seems to have used as a bookmark. This document, which he tucked into his copy of James's book, contains the unpublished manuscript—dated "March 2/63"—of what appears to be a dialogue between the poet ("me") and his son, Gregory ("g."), on God and God's relationship to nature. Finally, some more definitive evidence of Dudek's familiarity with and respect for James's works can be found in a footnote in *The Birth of Reason*, where Dudek includes the American intellectual in a list of the extraordinary people whom he felt had contributed to "The genuine history of philosophy" (86).



“divinity” as a word “denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete deity or not” (34; emphasis in original); and both of these definitions pave the way for his lecture on “Saintliness,” where he concludes that, in addition to the traditional Christian notion of God, “abstract moral ideals, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner visions of holiness or right may also be felt as the true lords and enlargers of our life” (272). Defined in this way, such terms resonate powerfully with Dudek’s conception of Atlantis as a utopian symbol of the ultimate reality or perfection towards which all people should strive. And yet, if we accept these definitions, we must also accept that Dudek is a religious poet—as much so as Pratt and Avison. In other words, James’s accommodation of personal as well as institutional values or systems of belief under the rubric of “religion” facilitates precisely the kind of “radically revised religion” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 175) that Dudek posited as a response both to the continuing influence of institutional religions and to the nihilism of post-Christian, disestablishment culture.

James’s definitions aside, it must be noted that Dudek himself wrote explicitly about the importance of religion to all poetry—including his own—and tacitly invited religious interpretations of his work through the vocabulary that he employed. At first blush, at least, Dudek’s use of religious language to describe his poetry and poetic vocation, which figures into the third section of this chapter, seems wholly in line with modernist strategies of substitution: art is assumed to have replaced religion, and artists take on some of the discourse and rituals normally reserved for religion. Even so, this kind of straightforward substitutionary formula does not account adequately for the complexity and ambivalence of Dudek’s vision. Indeed, his Jamesian aversion to “traditional” religion (*First Person* 10; *Dk* 135; “Ken Norris” 39), coupled with his

equally Jamesian attraction to openness and the unknown, sometimes led him to pen what most readers might consider remarkably inconclusive and evasive statements of religious self-identification, such as the following: “I am neither a materialist nor a theist, really, nor am I altogether an agnostic. As I say in [‘The Birth of Reason: Miletus and the Ionians’], ‘the ultimate reality is unknowable,’ but I am sure that if it were knowable it would satisfy both the materialist and the theist, and much more that we cannot even imagine” (*Notebooks* 208).<sup>147</sup> In Dudek’s thinking, this multi-faceted religious vision brings him into close contact with “Eliot, Yeats, Pound”—that is, “the three major poets of our time, all directly involved with the problem of religion” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 175). In another attempt at self-identification, Dudek nods to Eliot in referring to himself as “a modernist in literature (also a democratic-liberalist in politics, and a freethinking poet-philosopher in religion)” (“The End of Modernism” 3; emphasis in original).<sup>148</sup> But his religious position is not as derivative as the borrowed form of this latter statement would imply, nor was his interest in ultimate reality a passing philosophical interest.

Even in 1941, Dudek—seeking to avoid what he would later refer to as “the dead-end of modern secularism” (“Reality in the Arts” 13)—was drawn to “the world of ultimate reality, which is the substratum of the known world” (*1941 Diary* 24). As well, Dudek would cling to this basic understanding of reality as something divided into two

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147. “The Birth of Reason: Miletus and the Ionians” was later published as *The Birth of Reason* (1994).

148. In *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), Eliot famously declared that his “general point of view maybe described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion” (11). “The End of Modernism” is the unpublished manuscript of a lecture Dudek gave in Edmonton on 30 November 1984 (Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-0167 1990-07, “Series 4. Writing,” “Sub-series H. Lectures and Talks,” Box 52, File 17, manuscript, 1984).

realms, the known and the unknown, for his entire life, though he would adopt and adapt a variety of terms (such as “Atlantis,” “ultimate reality,” “the absolute”) and scientific theories (such as atomism and quantum physics) in an attempt to make sense of the unknown or ideal part of reality. In part as a result of his ongoing study of atomism, which I discuss in the final section of this chapter in the context of Dudek’s larger strategy of religious adaptation, he saw each of these realms as multi-faceted; his provisional, contingent, and inclusive understanding of reality translates into a pluralistic religious view, one which makes tentative gestures from the known to the unknown, from the world of the senses to an invisible and ideal world that can only be “intuited in poetic images” (Dudek, *Ideas for Poetry* 78). Further belying his indebtedness to James and the *sui generis* or perennialist school of religion, Dudek would even insist that “through the personal and the subjective the horizon of the permanent and the eternal must now be intuited, not as something known and sanctioned, but as something imaginatively sensed and humanly realized, in the poem” (“Ken Norris” 39). To say that this view of reality is tantamount to a religious rather than merely philosophical approach to life is, to an extent, simply to follow Dudek’s lead; one might argue, somewhat tautologically, that Dudek’s approach to life and to poetry is religious because he insists on religious vocabularies and interpretations. According to constructivists such as Wayne Proudfoot, this kind of insistence is all the justification one requires to classify Dudek as a religious poet or, more precisely, to consider his writing as a record of “religious experience”: “the distinguishing mark of religious experience,” writes Proudfoot, “is the subject’s belief that the experience can only be accounted for in religious terms” (223).

As Trehearne points out, “There can be . . . many narratives of Dudek’s development” (*Montreal Forties* 282), and in *The Montreal Forties: Modernist Poetry in Transition* (1999), which contains some of the most protracted and rigorous commentary on Dudek to date, he regards “the representation of consciousness” as the poet’s “primary artistic purpose” (283). Trehearne’s narrative is persuasive on multiple levels, but, like Davey’s *Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster* (1980), it tends to pass over the religious aspects of Dudek’s poetry and criticism. By contrast, the narrative I present here is one which attempts to reframe the critical conversation by accounting for Dudek’s representation of reality as a distinctly religious project co-extensive with his developing aesthetic concerns. A handful of critics, including Wynne Francis, Eva Seidner, Stromberg-Stein, George Hildebrand, and Antonio Ruiz Sánchez, have touched briefly on the transcendental or overtly religious features of Dudek’s writing. However, very few of these have given the subject any kind of sustained analysis. For example, in *Travelling to Knowledge: An Essay on Louis Dudek’s Long Poems* (2005), Ruiz Sánchez intermittently employs religious language to describe the nature and effects of Dudek’s poetry, but this language is used somewhat casually, with little concrete development: phrases such as “quasi-mystic tones” (118), “an almost visionary intensity” (119), and “a form of transcendence” (154) are used tentatively, as if to introduce a religious line of questioning that never fully materializes. Similarly, in “Modernism in the Booklength Poems of Louis Dudek,” Seidner provides excellent commentary on Dudek’s transcendental perspective in *Europe, En México*, and *Atlantis*, but the length and date of the essay prevents Seidner from moving beyond a general summary and synthesis of the poet’s otherworldly concerns up to 1977—that is, long before the publication of *The Birth of Reason* (1994)

and other late texts in which Dudek would further expound his atomist and religious ideas.

Collectively, these studies suggest that his exploration of reality and his “inquiries into the creative nature” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 305) are themes that run through his late and early poetry alike.<sup>149</sup> As I will argue here, however, these commonly identified themes relate on the most fundamental level not only to the artist-as-God motif upon which Dudek sometimes seems to rely, but also to the essentially adaptive religious strategy from which his lifelong quest for ultimate meaning—in nature, art, and consciousness—takes its cue. In *Atlantis* and in the decades that would follow its publication, Dudek would embrace many synonyms for “Atlantis” as part of an adaptive response to the increasingly urgent problems he associates with the process of secularization, not as part of a straightforward strategy of substitution or elimination.

#### **4.2 DISCOVERING ATLANTIS: DUDEK’S RELIGIOUS BREAKTHROUGH**

“*Atlantis* is in many ways an answer to the nihilism of modern literature. What I had been teaching through all those years, of analytic-reductive European thought, had stuck in my craw. I became convinced that there must be another side to the Nothingness (so-called *le Néant*) and the existential absurdism in which modern literature was embroiled; and that this missing element was perhaps the source of the grandeur and the glory of all past literature and art. It could not be wiped out by the skeptical tradition that had taken hold of western man. For the moment, in my long poem, I called this idea ‘Atlantis.’”  
(Dudek, “Louis Dudek” 139)<sup>150</sup>

As Ruiz Sánchez observes, even notable Dudek scholars such as Trehearne have “fail[ed]

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149. In “Towards the ‘Infinite Poem’: Reality and the Imagination in the 1950s and 1960s Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek” and “An ‘Architecture of Contradictions’: *Continuation* and the Late Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek,” I make a similar argument but with regard to Dudek’s meta-poetry specifically.

to notice that behind the apparent flux and meaningless combination of particulars” in *Atlantis* “there is an implicit vision” (89). Ruiz Sánchez then hints at the nature of this “implicit vision,” adding: “It is important to stress Dudek’s desire for transcendence, given that many of the stylistic choices of the poem can be explained from that perspective” (89). In this section, I will make similar assertions for Atlantis as the symbol of this so-called “desire for transcendence.” However, I will take Ruiz Sánchez’s argument further by establishing that this symbol is part of an explicit rather than implicit religious vision whose full significance extends well beyond *Atlantis* and its aesthetic principles. As we will see in subsequent sections, Dudek’s symbol of Atlantis variously informs the strategies of elimination, substitution, and adaptation operative in multiple poems and works of criticism; so while the ongoing search for—and imaginative construction of—this utopian civilization serves different rhetorical purposes, appearing occasionally as a trope of indeterminacy and uncertainty, his self-contained and idiosyncratic religious vision also contributes to the coherence and ambition of his larger poetic and critical projects.

In Dudek’s writing, Atlantis becomes a symbol to which Dudek attaches personal as well as mythological meanings. For Dudek, Atlantis is—as it was for Plato, Pierre Benoit, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and countless others—a mysterious “lost continent” (*Atlantis* 140, 151).<sup>151</sup> Nevertheless, Dudek has little interest in the historical origins of the term, which quickly becomes “a very large idea,” in *Atlantis* and elsewhere, that represents such things as an “ideal order” that “gives shape and meaning to our groping,

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150. Dudek offers very similar remarks in a 1975 interview with Michael Darling (14) and in a letter, from November of 2000, to Ruiz Sánchez (qtd. in Ruiz Sánchez 88).

stumbling, disordered lives” (“Louis Dudek: Canada’s ‘Ideogram of Reality’” 141). Most significantly, perhaps, this positive understanding of Atlantis was interpreted by Dudek himself as a religious “breakthru” (qtd. in Ruiz Sánchez 88) formulated in response to the extreme forms of pessimistic unbelief discussed above. Against these strains of pessimism or negation, Dudek posits both his book, *Atlantis*, and the symbol underlying it: his personal notebook entry for 3 March 1968 reads, “Atlantis – just a new kind of proof of god’s existence” (emphasis in original).<sup>152</sup> While Dudek was certainly not an apologist for institutional religions, his breakthrough discovery of the idea of Atlantis merits critical consideration, since this symbol offers one possible lens through which the disparate elements of his religious and poetic visions comes into focus.

Future critics might also consider how the idea of Atlantis is prefigured in Dudek’s early writings. For example, as early as 1947, when he published “Street Scene” in *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (edited by fellow poet Earle Birney, and by Pratt before him), his poetry arguably contained the seeds of *Atlantis* and of his later religious concerns. Although “Street Scene” is only a short lyric poem, and although it is from what Trehearne calls the Montreal poet’s “apprenticeship decade” (*Montreal Forties* 243), it anticipates his writings against nihilist thought and for a religious or transcendental interpretation of reality. The poem begins by describing a “grey / morning” (3-4) and street with people “in dimly-coloured clothes” (4) who have “no music in their minds” (6)—seemingly because they have stripped of a vibrant imagination capable of illuminating anything other than the mechanistic, material world

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151. Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi’s *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* provides a parenthetical listing of texts on Atlantis by the authors I mention here, as well as several others I do not (24-25).

in which they seem to be mired. The young poet ponders  
what they are now, what they have been  
four hundred and more years ago,  
how religion with its imagination  
fell from them, a bird on its wing, the pure spirit of man,  
and now how they are true in every way to the machine  
and think, cold, the silent life out singly[.] (7-12)

This portrait of a people robbed of the benefits of religion is not a defence of institutional religion; like Dudek's later comments about Atlantis, this isolated, forgotten poem is a lament for the loss of the kind of hopeful, animating vision that religion had consistently provided prior to the advent of the modern era "four hundred and more years ago" ("Street Scene" 8). As well, Dudek's hypothetical self-identification as a visionary artist (the poem opens, "And if I were a painter I would paint / these people, their purposes and their beliefs" [1-2]) indicates that, even before proposing Atlantis as a solution to modern society's spiritual malaise, he saw himself as someone who could see beyond this drab reality, as someone who could use his artistic abilities to make "all we do not see suddenly seen" (18).

It bears repeating that, like the visionary artist in "Street Scene," Dudek's *Atlantis* offers an explicitly religious view of reality: of the transcendental optimism to which the poem's titular symbol refers, he writes, "This is of course religion, or the fragments of a new religion" ("Arts, Entertainment and Religion" 180). The fragments of this new religion are ephemeral "bits of Atlantis" (*Atlantis* 10), the godlike, ideal essence the poet

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152. Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-0167 1990-07, "Series 1. Personal," "Sub-series B. Diaries and Notebooks," Box 1, File 6, manuscript, 1968-1969.



believes to be embedded in “all men, and all living things” (11). Unfortunately, as he notes during the outgoing transatlantic voyage detailed in *Atlantis*’s Prologue, this essence is not evident immediately, or for long; it might be

. . . made invisible, or hardened,

or covered with deep hard crust,

until it is scraped or dug for, or cleared away,

or with love reached, or by art or other good,

seen for a moment[.] (11)

In this passage, *Atlantis* seems to be an untainted, universal essence comparable to the kind of untranslated, pre-linguistic personal religion esteemed by James; one must peel back layers of linguistic, philosophical, theological, and political “crust”—much like the “encrusted words and structures” described in Avison’s “Uncircular” (167)—to reveal it in its purest form. However, Davey avers that *Atlantis* is not, or not only, a signifier of all that is good: “‘Atlantis’ contains the raw material of life and art; to Dudek the sea is the ‘lost continent’ of life’s mysteries; it embodies the universal urges towards continuity, destruction, endurance and beauty. It represents the indifferent flux which includes generosity and massacres, murder and miracles” (*Louis Dudek 77*). Inexplicably, though, Davey seems to attribute what he identifies as the persona’s “boredom” to the poem’s lack of “rhyme and rhetoric,” and then praises the Epilogue—which contains no more rhyme than the sections that precede it—as “the only extended exception to this deliberate blandness” (77). That is, like many of Dudek’s interlocutors, he misreads the poem’s “prevailing calm” (77) as disinterest, as a Platonic rejection of the material, rather

than as a record of the poet's intense but measured curiosity and consideration of the world before him as a necessary corollary to the world of forms glimpsed in the poem's many epiphanies.<sup>153</sup> More usefully, perhaps, Peter Stevens opines in his 1969 review of *Atlantis* that the poem does not reject one world for another; instead, it relies on the constant movement and tension between the two: "The poem works from this surface to find the Atlantis of meaning, which in simple terms is a belief in living life to the full in the present" (77).

And yet, defining Atlantis "in simple terms" is a difficult task, and "living life to the full in the present" is a somewhat reductive mantra, given the transcendental and utopian aspects of Dudek's vision. That said, Stevens is right to foreground Dudek's interest in the present: Dudek remarks, "The point is, no matter how great or powerful was the past, / there is only the present, / and the past exists only as the present" (*Atlantis* 26). As this passage indicates, Dudek is also opposed to misplaced or overindulgent nostalgia: in *Atlantis*, he admits, for example, that "Even in the highest cultures, mystic India, / there was wanton cruelty" (123). This realistic perspective offsets the fantastical one implied by the poem's title; unlike *Europe*, *Atlantis* is not so much a nostalgic voyage through the past—or through Europe—as it is a meditation on present conditions and possible futures.

Like most utopias, therefore, Atlantis is a future-oriented eschatology, a time rather than a place. Atlantis and the interchangeable concepts of God, heaven, and

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153. Other critics also found *Atlantis* to be lacking in vibrancy or rhythmic and emotional intensity: for example, Paul Denham remarks that "too often Mr. Dudek's abstractions become rather ponderous, and the rhythm of the verse, so surely handled throughout much of the poem, tends to go flat" (234); Barry Cole baulks at the poem's "vapid philosophising" (169); and Douglas Barbour claims that a number of its more discursive passages "fall terribly flat as poetry" (26).

ultimate reality signify for Dudek “possibility” and “potential.”<sup>154</sup> Atlantis is truly a utopian “no-place”<sup>155</sup>—which is perhaps why Dudek can only vaguely locate it “somewhere, at the horizon” (*Atlantis* 148), with the “horizon” serving as a temporal metaphor rather than as a geographical descriptor. As Dudek confesses earlier in the poem, Atlantis is “the one true / and lasting city, that may never be” (41), and at times he seems to grow impatient with this arrangement: he complains that “we live in exile / waiting for that world to come” (10). Of course, the “we” here is a bit presumptuous, since Dudek’s utopia may very well be a dystopia for others. As Richard Sommer would have it, “Atlantis is simply the traveller’s restlessness itself, projected forward to a utopian vanishing-point, a non-image of perfected human experience and society by which the images of Europe are evaluated” (135). In later poems such as *Continuation I*, Dudek stresses that “The ideal is only the touchstone, / it is not the goal” (32); the search for Atlantis is a valuable, if interminable, process of discovery.<sup>156</sup>

In any case, such quotations—about Atlantis as potential, as horizon—hint at the much-discussed intersection of modernist avant-garde practice and utopian theory.<sup>157</sup> On

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154. See, for example, Dudek (“An Interview” 14), *Continuation II* (59), Dudek’s preface to the 1991 re-release of *Europe* (18), and *Notebooks 1960-1994* (108, 154).

155. As Lyman Tower Sargent explains, “The word *utopia* or *outopia* simply means *no* or *not place*. *Topos* means place; ‘u’ or ‘ou’ means ‘no’ or ‘not.’ Thomas More, inventor of the word, punned on *eutopia* or *good place*, and we have since added *dystopia* or *bad place*” (5). Sommer seems aware of this etymology when he writes, “Atlantis is the place which is ‘real’ because it is inaccessible and not, finally, a place at all” (135).

156. As many of Dudek’s critics have observed, the interminable voyage is a particularly apt structural metaphor for *Atlantis* as well as *Europe* and *En México*, the two blatant travel poems that preceded it, but also for *Continuation*, which takes much further *Atlantis*’s “reduced representation of literal in favour of mental travel,” so that the voyage becomes a metaphor used almost exclusively to reflect on “the journey of the mind” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 279).

157. See, for example, *Modernism: Designing a New World: 1914-1939*, edited by Christopher Wilk, *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia*, by Stephen Eric Bronner, *Utopian Spaces of Modernism*, edited by Rosalyn Gregory and Benjamin

one hand, the modernist obsession with the sordid details of the everyday sometimes seems to preclude the transcendental, further reinforcing the secularization thesis. On the other hand, old and new forms of religious belief alike continued to survive in Canada and abroad, and religious beliefs of various kinds were occasionally voiced by avant-garde groups such as *Die Brücke* and *Der Blaue Reiter*, which Andrew Thacker says “conceived art as a form of ‘spiritual utopia’ that would counteract the negative effects of modernity” (142).<sup>158</sup> Although Dudek did not join such a group, his avant-garde experimentation with the Canadian long poem and his simultaneous exploration of Atlantis as a utopian form of “potential, not yet realized” (“In a Nutshell” 116) establish him as an indirect and somewhat unlikely successor in an international line of spiritually minded modernists. Moreover, this bifurcated view of an ultimate reality that is both “potential” and “not yet realized” is not unique to Dudek; a similar paradox is also reflected in the field of utopian studies itself, where the “utopian impulse” described in Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*—an impulse which propels human beings forward in myriad areas of life—stands in opposition to the idea of a systematic and fully realized utopian program (Jameson 1-3). Atlantis is unreal and unrealizable as a utopian program, which it does not pretend to be; the idea of Atlantis, in contrast, represents the utopian impulse that motivates Dudek’s efforts to gradually bring about pragmatic, real-world results through his art, criticism, editing, publishing, teaching, and mentorship.

In the sense that Dudek’s idea of Atlantis aims to improve conditions in the present, it also corresponds with the utopian fantasies of other modernist poets. Like T.S.

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Kohlmann, and *Utopia: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, edited by David Ayers, Benedikt Hjartarson, Tomi Huttunen, and Harri Veivo. 158. In this passage, Thacker is summarizing claims made by Christina Lodder in “Searching for Utopia.”

Eliot, for instance, who expressed his concern about the “depression of standards of art and culture” (“The Idea of a Christian Society” 32), Dudek presented Atlantis as a counter to the threat of such a “depression” in Canada. In this respect, his utopian vision, which reflects a somewhat paradoxical interest in both the humanistic and the transcendental, seems to intersect with Eliot’s portrait of a universal Christian society. According to Tony Tremblay, Dudek responded to “the highest and most noble civic calling: the moral responsibility of the artist to work tirelessly toward the building of civilization” (10). Notably, the utopian civilization of Atlantis that he worked to construct reinforced divisions between the initiated and the uninitiated, between an intellectual elite and the philistine masses, and between “high” and “low” culture.<sup>159</sup> In this and other respects, however, Atlantis aligns even more powerfully with Pound’s “city of Dioce,” from Canto 74 (445); Dudek seems to have crafted it as a deliberate correlative of what, in *Dk/ Some Letters of Ezra Pound* (1974), he glosses as “Pound’s idea of the just city” (98). As Dudek notes, other place names in Pound’s *Cantos* represent such an ideal, including Wagadu (*Dk* 63-64), Agbatana or Ecbatan (93), and Tai wu Tze (97-98)—just as scholars such as Leon Surette, Helen M. Dennis, Kay Davis, William Cookson, and Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos have observed how “Eleusis” is, for Pound, related to the idea of paradise as “a metonymic term denoting the possibility of mystical revelation or psychic experience” (Liebregts 68). In his correspondence with Pound, Dudek expresses great interest in ideal cities such as Dioce as early as May of 1951 (*Dk* 64), and he followed up with Pound about their origins and meanings on multiple occasions in 1953 (*Dk* 93-99). Dioce even figures in an epigraph to the revised 1991 edition of *Europe*.

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159. As my use of “philistine” implies, some of these divisions are distinctly Arnoldian. However, Eliot also drew from Coleridge in his repeated references to a “clerisy” or

Still, Atlantis is not a symbol on which Dudek projects any kind of recognizable political program; above all, it represents a religious vision that is the many-layered product of his strivings towards what James labels “civic or patriotic utopias” (*Varieties* 272). For Davey and bpNichol, the editors of a special issue of *Open Letter* entitled *Louis Dudek: Texts & Essays* (1981), “Dudek’s City of Dioce” signifies “all-encompassing love, Walt Whitman’s love, love that is human compassion—and love not left romantic” (“Biography” 317). However, such a definition does not account for the mutually informative religious and artistic ideas so central in Pound and Dudek’s respective bodies of work. After all, Pound and Dudek did share in common a belief that any “new civilization” of a utopian nature “sees a necessary interrelation between the economic, the political, the moral, and the aesthetic aspects of life” (“Exotic Reference” 10).<sup>160</sup> In Dudek’s opinion, this holistic view of civilization “goes back to Plato”—not to the man “who as you know got himself a bad name for exiling the poets from the ideal state,” but rather to the Plato he believed “wanted to protect poetry against itself, and to give it a place in the practical realm of human values. Not to exile poetry, but to relate it to an ideal city” (“Poetry as a Way of Life” 17). Indeed, one of the crucial ways that Dudek would “relate” his own poetry “to an ideal city” and help modernist poetry survive would be to experiment with “functional poetry,” a poetry that competes with prose in its ability to “invade the areas of life where human energy has gone” (“Functional Poetry” 2). For Dudek, religion constituted one of these key “areas of life,” and the symbol of Atlantis provided him with the intellectual prompts he needed to stage this aesthetic-pragmatic

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intellectual elite (see, for example, Mullins and Jacobs).

160. Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-0167 1990-07, “Series 4. Writing,” “Sub-series F. Articles,” Box 47, File 75, typescript, undated. For evidence of this view in Dudek’s poetry, see, for example, *Europe* (107ff.) and *Atlantis* (61, 84).

intervention on multiple fronts.

### **4.3 BEYOND “CHURCH RELIGION”: CHURCHGOING IN THE AGE OF SECULARIZATION AND THE DEATH OF GOD**

“‘God is dead,’ as the Existentialists say. Man is the new god. This is the modern moral equation, and we know that a number of different possibilities result from this descent from the divine into the merely human. If man is all—or the here and now is all—then some very disturbing things happen to the here and now.”  
(Dudek, “Reality in the Arts” 9)

“we must learn to look beyond the present dichotomies (such as our laboratory science and church religion) toward a distant horizon . . .”  
(Dudek, “Nationalism” 268)

Considering Dudek’s many complaints about Christianity and institutional religion more generally, one might be surprised to learn that Dudek writes frequently of churches and his visits to them—more so than Pratt and Avison combined. This interest in churches and church buildings is manifest even in his first long poem, *Europe*, in which he names Cathedrals as one of “three great subjects of the poem”; “the Sea,” “the Acropolis of Athens,” and the Cathedrals he encounters while on his Grand Tour “are symbolic bearers of a larger meaning, each a different dimension of the great possibility” (Dudek, “Preface” 15). However, he often describes his visits to Europe’s great churches only to announce why he is not like the other people—whether fellow tourists or actual believers—who have come to visit them. The poet-persona of *Europe* and subsequent long poems appears to assume the role of detached observer, much like the “bored cyclist” of Philip Larkin’s “Church Going” (Lewis 1)—which was published in the same year as *Europe*—or the nonchalant passerby of Leonard Cohen’s “I Have Not Lingered in European Monasteries.” This arm’s-length pose is one congruent with Dudek’s dismissal

of Avison's poetry, which he feels has been wastefully "channeled into [the] old stream-bed" of orthodox Christianity ("Poets of Heaven and Hell" 226).<sup>161</sup> As both of the epigraphs for this section suggest, however, Dudek is really most interested in moving away from "church religion" and what James calls the church's "secondary growths" (qtd. in Richardson 406), not religion per se; in his own churchgoing scenes, he embraces Stevens's strategy of "elimination" for polemic purposes, in order to challenge institutional religion in its most rigid or corrupt forms.

As Mutter explains, "Elimination does not look for substitute satisfactions, but uproots the very needs, desires, and moral assumptions that were a part of the religious framework. . . . Elimination, then, would not just discard the idea of God, but would also discard all of the ancillary ideas and dispositions that accompanied that idea: nature, man, the self, grammar" (745). Dudek clearly does not go this far, despite his unwillingness to accept the form of institutional Christianity that the churches in poems such as *Atlantis* represent. He rejects the strategy of elimination precisely because he cannot bring himself to reject the idea of God and "the ancillary ideas and dispositions that accompanied that idea." Instead, as Mutter says of Stevens's poetry—and as I have already implied, above, regarding Dudek's breakthrough discovery of *Atlantis*—his writing "shows us how such a relinquishment might be undesirable or even impossible" (742). In the wake of the so-called death of God, Dudek's poetry and prose remains committed to the idea of God, at least, and it patiently works to unbalance "the modern moral equation" in which "Man is

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161. It is ironic that Dudek criticizes Avison's orthodox religious poetry for falling on one extreme end of his "Heaven and Hell" spectrum (which moves from the nihilism and chaos of postmodernity to the imposed order of traditional religion), when their late writing is at points virtually indistinguishable. For instance, the conclusion of Avison's "When We Hear a Witness Give Evidence," with its epiphanic description of "a



the new god” (“Reality in the Arts” 9).

In *The Birth of Reason*, Dudek acknowledges that religious mythologies are socio-cultural constructs: he writes that the Judeo-Christian God of the Old Testament “can never be anything other than a projection of the human mind, of human feelings, of human life, to a universal plane. For we can only know what we know, that is, our world” (66). And Dudek maintains that, before monotheism, when the idea of God was represented by multiple signifiers or gods, these gods were again merely “mythological projections of human and animal life forms, magnified and generalized to account for every event in the world and beyond” (67).<sup>162</sup> Yet Dudek distinguishes between the idea of God and the ultimate reality or divinity to which such mythologies or symbols refer: “The gods are not invented, they are discovered / and rediscovered!” (*Atlantis* 105). It would therefore be incorrect to assume that, for Dudek, there is no such thing as God or gods, or even that the idea of God cannot serve (positive) pragmatic functions. He sees churchgoing and the concomitant idea of God that draws people to church as potentially useful, insofar as they encourage people to act kindly and ethically (*Atlantis* 51; *Birth of Reason* 67), inspire them to strive for higher ideals (*Birth of Reason* 81), or serve as an ever-present reminder of the ultimate reality that the church and its symbols represent. Obviously, any mythology can also become a weapon used to justify oppression, violence, colonization, genocide, and many other human atrocities, and Dudek seems to have been resistant to institutional religions precisely because he was keenly aware how,

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Presence” that “may briefly shine” (19), could easily be mistaken for any number of passages in Dudek’s *Continuation* poems, particularly “Continuation III [FRAGMENT].”<sup>162</sup> Similar ideas are developed in *Atlantis* (91, 105), “The Bible as Fugue” (133), and *The Birth of Reason* (13, 75).

throughout history, they had been routinely instrumentalized for such purposes.<sup>163</sup>

However, in spite of his knowledge of religious institutions' many crimes and their willful narrow-mindedness, Dudek cannot help but defend the idea of God at the heart of religion: "despite all this," he writes,

I would also be the first to agree that the stories, the myths, the poetry of mankind, such as we find them in religion and in tradition, are the expression of human aspirations and emotions that we need for a full human existence. The "truth" in these myths, stories, poems resides in their ability to convey and to sustain those aspirations from generation to generation. (*Birth of Reason* 80)

Such a passage speaks to Dudek's reserved but pragmatic view of religion, a distinctly Jamesian view that may explain why, in *Atlantis*, he can critique the church and the act of churchgoing even as he affirms their pragmatic significance, cryptically declaring, "I need no vow, if ever I go to church, / to hold me to what I am there for" (91).

Cumulatively, then, the churchgoing scenes in *Atlantis* and in Dudek's other touristic poems reveal not a strategy of elimination so much as an ambivalence towards the kinds of beliefs and behaviours that churchgoing seems to engender. The fragments comprising *Atlantis*—which began to take shape on scraps of travel pamphlets, maps, and cruise-ship letterhead during Dudek's 1961 trip to Europe<sup>164</sup>—dramatize numerous visits to churches in cities such as Naples, Rome, Florence, Paris, and London. Before leaving Italy, the first country on his itinerary, he admits to some churchgoing fatigue in a self-

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163. See, for example, *Atlantis* (50) and "What Do You Have Against Myth?" (136-37).

164. *Atlantis*'s fragmentary composition on such travel documents is evident in materials from Dudek's 1961 trip to Europe. See, for example, the typescript poem "Voyages" and the various manuscript drafts, pamphlets, maps, and other materials located in Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-0167 1990-07, "Series 4. Writing,"

contradictory statement that actually reiterates his commitment to continue touring the occasional church, if only on his own terms: “Well, I no longer visit churches,” he reports from Florence, “but every day walk up and down the aisle of Santa Maria Novella” (57). Yet in Naples, at the very outset of his travels, he had already offered some strong opinions about the church and, by extension, those who rely on it:

The church is merely a structure  
to contain the emotions of those who feel.  
It is sometimes a work of art for those who do.

Italian men make their confession  
face to face with the priest, without a partition.  
I do not know the history  
but the first Christians must have told their sins  
out of piety and contrition,  
and found this solace good.

The “shrewd psychology” of the Church  
is only the natural language of feeling.  
We who never know contrition,  
or sin, or the need for oneness,  
say they devised means  
to inveigle or decoy the people.

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“Sub-series A. Published Works,” Box 33, File 2 (“Atlantis: drafts of poems and memorabilia”), Folders A and B.

But the Church is not shrewd. It is strong  
because it is real: for more than a thousand years  
it was as true as poetry. (19)

In this passage, which arguably reads quite flatly—a prime example of what Dudek pejoratively labels “chopped prose” (“Breathless Adventure” 41)—he implicitly draws a line between “those who feel” and those who think. Using the pronoun “We,” he smugly places himself in the latter camp, suggesting that the “Italian men” and practitioners of the faith he observes in church are the unwitting victims of a patently manipulative system.<sup>165</sup>

Even so, it appears Dudek would rather be mistaken for one of the devout than for a tourist. Immediately before the passage quoted above, he grouses,

I am tired of people who come gaping at churches.

In the middle of High Mass

on Easter morning

they gape at the dome, while others pray with their eyes down.

Not to be with them, I will pray for this once. (19)

Dudek’s complaint is richly ironic, given the fact that he, too, is a tourist who has come to “gape at the dome” in his own way. Dudek’s fonds at Library and Archives Canada contains plenty of evidence that, like the gawking churchgoers he ridicules, he was just another tourist whose experience of Europe was influenced by the travel company, maps,

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165. Dudek makes a similar gesture, carefully distancing himself from other churchgoers, while in Paris (*Atlantis* 74).

and English-speaking guided tours on which he was dependent.<sup>166</sup> In this light, Dudek's condescension and arrogance towards other churchgoers is somewhat difficult to stomach, as is his lofty contention that "Very few come to Europe to find / what I've come for, perhaps none" (140). In any case, whether his fellow travellers were in search of the deeper truths of Atlantis or not, critics such as Northrop Frye had been unimpressed by the philosophical fruits of Dudek's earlier adventures, referring to the poet's style of travel in *Europe* as "superficial tourism" and the ideas themselves as "commonplace" ("Letters" 298). Whether deliberately or no, the persona of *Atlantis* remains an interloper, a tourist, despite his more than superficial interest in the positive and aspirational qualities that the church embodies.

In a later churchgoing scene in Paris, Dudek again looks down on those worshipping around him and concludes, "I don't know what the church can do" (74); however, he then proceeds to parenthetically affirm his own beliefs in a universal, transcendental truth without recourse to the institutional framework he has just disparaged: "(Je ne suis pas croyant, / mais je crois à la vérité / que la croyance toutefois recherchait.)" (74). Such a statement of faith points clearly to its object, Atlantis (signified here by "la vérité"), and therefore helps readers answer the riddle of what Dudek is referring to when he writes such enigmatic phrases as "the Church pretends to what I most desire" (62) or (as quoted above) "I need no vow, if ever I go to church, / to hold me to what I am there for" (91). What Dudek most desires, and what Dudek goes to church to discover, is a firmer grasp on the truth, on ultimate reality. So, while Dudek is

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166. Dudek travelled with "American Express Travel Service Naples," for example, and his trip to Pompeii was not an independent excursion via public transit but a bus tour with an English-speaking guide (see Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-

happy enough to be rid of the church, he is also troubled by the possibility that the loss of the church may result in the elimination of religious beliefs and ideas altogether. As he tells Michael Darling, “it’s a dreadful tragedy to contemplate what man has done as he has removed the religious dimension, the Christian and the philosophical idealism, from his vision” (“An Interview” 13). Clearly, this Dudek, like the churchgoing Dudek of *Atlantis*, has little interest in Stevens’s strategy of elimination.

Indeed, what appears to be anti-religious sentiment in Dudek’s churchgoing scenes is often merely anti-institutional sentiment. For instance, when he visits the Pantheon in Rome and castigates those who destroyed or repurposed such buildings, he singles out “the Church militant” or “the Church of Rome” (50) for the acts that these factions or de facto political entities carried out under the aegis of a benevolent God. In other texts, he rails against institutional religion for its corruption, its suppression of art or of philosophical and scientific knowledge, its violence, and its justification of colonial practices. Such complaints can be found in “What Do You Have Against Myth?”, where he takes aim at the early Christian church for its “considerable intolerance” (154); in *The Birth of Reason*, where he blames Christianity for the censorship of the Greek atomists specifically and the persecution of other radical intellectual movements more generally (34, 58); and in *Notebooks 1960-1994*, where he refers to Christianity as a “horrible old religion carried to an extreme, with an excess of fervor and an excess of purity” or as “bigotry made small and personal” (164), and where he labels Judaism, Christianity, and Islam “exclusive and dogmatic religions,” indicting them “for the great wars of religion throughout the centuries, with persecutions, inquisitions, and enforced belief as their self-

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0167 1990-07, “Series 4. Writing,” “Sub-series A. Published Works,” Box 33, File 2 [“Atlantis: drafts of poems and memorabilia”], Folder B).

righteous policy” (117). Of course, these and many other samples of prose not quoted here recapitulate complaints levelled at institutional religion by James, often using the same vocabulary: as Craig Martin notes, James “talks about ‘institutional religion’ with the following normative rhetoric: ‘corporate ambitions,’ ‘the spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule,’ ‘hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition’ (2004, 293), ‘baseness,’ ‘bigotries,’ and ‘the spirit of dogmatic dominion’ (296), ‘corruption by excess’ (297), and ‘fanaticism’ (298)” (186). In her analysis of *Atlantis*, Seidner makes a characteristically postmodernist, anti-foundationalist assertion, which she uses to compare Dudek to Stevens, that might be used to explain why Dudek reproduces James’s accusations: “Before the poet can produce verse which has redemptive power,” she writes, “he must sever himself from the fraudulent security of the old systems of belief” (22).

What is particularly fascinating in Dudek’s case, however, is the extent to which his religious vision coincides with his mature poetics, as expressed in the seminal texts “A Note on Metrics” (1958) and “Functional Poetry” (1959). To begin with, Dudek does not substitute art for religion because he believes in his poetry’s “redemptive power,” as Seidner implies; instead, he elides religion’s institutional forms and certainties while retaining *Atlantis* as the comparatively fluid and halting symbol of redemption to which his poetry refers.<sup>167</sup> Yet he is also wary of turning this symbol into a fixed system of its own—and here is where the connections between Dudek’s poetics and his religious views

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167. Despite his writings about *Atlantis* and his unflagging devotion to poetry as an editor, publisher, and public intellectual, Dudek had sincere doubts about poetry’s so-called “redemptive power” (Seidner 22). In his unpublished 1975 diary, the entry for 24 January contains this shockingly pessimistic comment: “There is no salvation in poetry. Strange, I thought there was once” (Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds,

are most apparent. Regarding the “transcendental optimism” that informs the idea of Atlantis, Dudek alleges, “It is not necessary to formulate the dogma for this philosophy, for if I do then somebody will nail it down, turn it into a system of belief, and then let it harden and fossilize. I prefer to leave it as an open thing” (“Louis Dudek: Canada’s ‘Ideogram of Reality’” 152). Of course, this process of calcification is at the heart of James’s critique of the inevitable shift from personal to institutional religion, but the language here is the exact same as that which Dudek employs to describe an equivalent poetic process. In “Functional Poetry,” for example, it is “the residue of ‘poetic’ substance” rather than the transcendental symbol of Atlantis that is in danger of becoming “fossilized” (1)—not as “dogma” or as “a system of belief,” but as “decadent metre and form” (1).<sup>168</sup> In an analogous process, mythologies, too, can become rigid or codified, “a fixed idea” that is “dead, / a decoration” (*Atlantis* 30). In sum, then, one might argue that Dudek’s understanding of this general process as described in James, or in Dudek’s writings about the church, is intimately connected to such seemingly disparate things as Dudek’s rejection of Frye’s archetypal approach to literature (*Atlantis* 30) or even his loathing of nationalist fervour, which he interprets as “part of this mythological order of thinking” (“What Do You Have Against Myth?” 155). For Dudek, fixed poetic forms and mythologies could both provide useful frameworks for truly original insights and analysis, but too often they did the opposite, patterning and constraining thought in the same way that institutional religion limited and distorted the deeper religious truths upon which he meditated as a tourist and churchgoer.

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LMS-0167 1990-07, “Series 1. Personal,” “Sub-series B. Diaries and Notebooks,” Box 1, File 8, manuscript, 1975-1976[?].



#### 4.4 ART AND/AS RELIGION: THE STRATEGY OF SUBSTITUTION

“*Europe* and, indeed, all of Dudek’s poetry is an attempt to answer the overwhelming question of what is to replace our prayer beads.”  
(Seidner 26)

“What we need is a mean between the positions of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound: a view of civilization, art, life, that is both transcendental and humanist at the same time; a ‘religion’ which is not traditional, but a valid extension of knowledge; and an art that is not antiquarian, but creative in accord with that comprehension. It must be possible.”  
(Dudek, “In This Number” 32)

Despite his uncertainty about the value of the church, Dudek’s intuitions about the existence of an ultimate reality appear, at times, to lead him in the direction of what Mutter calls Stevens’s strategy of substitution—that is, the strategy embodied by Stevens’s “Supreme Fiction,” which Gregory Brazeal defines as “an idea that would serve as a fictive replacement for the idea of God, known to be fictive but willfully believed” (80). But to what extent is Dudek’s idea of Atlantis such a fiction? As Mutter clarifies, the substitutionary strategy driving Stevens’s “Supreme Fiction” is one which “shifts the attention from the content of the religious idea to the needs and desires that generated it. Supposing that certain needs are immutable, one seeks other agents or structures to satisfy them” (744). Many Romantic, Victorian, and modernist poets—Percy Bysshe Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Yeats, and Laura Riding among them—put this strategy into practice, hoping to fill the void created by the nineteenth-century crisis of faith by positing art as a new kind of religion and artists as a new kind of priesthood or mystical elite. “Anywhere one looks,” Karl Shapiro remarks of the nineteenth century, “it

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168. For similar remarks, see also “A Note on Metrics” (15) or *Notebooks: 1960-1994*, where Dudek writes, “Literary language tends to ossify, it needs constant infusion from below to keep it flowing and alive” (35).

appears that the ‘poetry of religion’ resolves into the ‘religion of poetry’” (297).

As a lifelong student of poetry, Dudek was familiar with this shift and its many proponents,<sup>169</sup> and both his public apologies for art and his poetry occasionally exhibit a comparable desire to elevate art to the status once enjoyed by religion. One could argue, as Wynne Francis does, that Dudek is essentially an Arnoldian for whom “poetry has taken on, as Arnold predicted it would, the burden previously borne by religion” (5)—or, as Bernd Dietz puts it, that Dudek’s “unyielding desire” was “to practice the religion of poetry” (xi). At first glance, these assessments ring true: Dudek states, for example, that the ideal “can only be intuited in poetic images” (*Ideas* 78), and in many respects he seems to take up Pound’s Arnoldian challenge “to set the arts in their rightful place as the acknowledged guide and lamp of civilization,” to hold up the arts “in preference to the church and scholarship” (qtd. in Dudek, *Dk* 119). This kind of clarion call, with its distinct note of Shelleyan optimism, exemplifies Stevens’s substitutionary strategy: religion has passed the torch of civilization to art. Nevertheless, as we will see here, Dudek rarely confuses religion with art or seeks to substitute his own poetry for “prayer beads” (Seidner 26). More often, his idiosyncratic religious vision is promoted alongside his vision for the arts. As *Atlantis* and other poems demonstrate, the idea of God continued to be attractive to Dudek; he did not want to eliminate “religious residues” (Mutter 742) or substitute art for religion. Instead, he wanted to use his writing to encourage religious thought along avenues previously closed off or ignored as a result of institutional interference, and he saw art as an important tool in this process—not as a

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169. See, for example, “Those Damned Visionary Poets [Les Poètes Maudits Visionnaires],” in which he names Rimbaud and Blake as forerunners of what he calls “Primary romanticism—i.e., the visionary kind that recasts the universe of perception which ruined religion leaves lying loose in the poet’s mind” (166).

quasi-spiritual end in itself.

Dudek wrote directly about the strategy of substitution, linking it to the Romantic crisis of faith: “since the Romantic movement in literature,” he argues, “art has been the vehicle that has carried and contained these past glories: permanent beauty, the wisdom and curative power of nature, the truth of human feelings, the virtue of distilled religion, the highest truths about our earthly existence” (“The Idea of Art” 14). Mutter provides a corresponding narrative of this shift from a religious to a “secular imaginary,” a shift that “may involve the relinquishment of entire frameworks associated with God: all of the attitudes, dispositions, values, concerns, desires, expectations; in short, all the habits of thought, feeling, and imagination that were only intelligible and coherent within that framework” (742). In one version of this substitutionary model, poetry, specifically, is said to take on the rituals of religion—and, in the process, poetry itself becomes tantamount to religion in its efforts at transcendence. Such attempts at substitution seem to feature, for example, in *Atlantis*, where Dudek uses a meta-poetic fragment to declare that the elevated language of the poetry he is trying to write “demands an occasion— / a ritual (today is Palm Sunday)” (7). Poetry figures here as a ritualistic and sacred replacement for religion, with the implication that poets have become high priests or even gods. However, he is careful not to take this latter comparison too far: in *En México*, he quips that “an artist is only a pipsqueak / in a forest of mocking birds” (35), and in *Atlantis*, he downplays his own significance, calling himself a “failed traducer” and a “vain idealizing peacock” (83). Accordingly, he turns once again to the idea of God for inspiration, seemingly spurning the substitutionary logic he previously entertained as a would-be poet-priest:

Yet there is one who looks with warm detachment  
out upon the world,  
and would create, out of that fury and violence,  
an order and a beauty that is all his own. (*Atlantis* 83)

Again, as in much of Dudek's writing, this Godlike "one" appears to be deployed as a trope, as a linguistic gesture towards concepts for which Dudek has not yet found a new vocabulary. For this reason, perhaps, he personifies this creative "one who looks" alternatively as nature itself ("nature is the prime artist" [*Atlantis* 7]), or as an artist imbued with Godlike powers (using what Trehearne—referring to *Continuation I*—refers to as "the postcard cliché that links his stanzas on God's creation and his own self-creation" [*Montreal Forties* 251]).

In either instance, God seems to have become a linguistic cipher emptied of all but its residual symbolic potential, with the real work of creation having been passed on to nature and to artists. Yet, ironically, the metaphors used to write religion out of the existential equation actually reinscribe rather than replace religious interpretations of reality and the poet's role. As Mutter argues, "many linguistic modes that find their most complex articulation in poetry—metaphor, analogy, and symbol—remain implicitly dependent on, or even generate, religious accounts of the world and human desire" (742). Consequently, in Dudek's poetry, God survives explicitly, as a cognate term for Atlantis, or implicitly, as a not-quite-neutered metaphor for various creative processes. In "At Lac En Coeur" (1959), for instance, "the living universe" is framed in distinctly religious language as "a drawing by a master hand" (218), and in *Atlantis*, he writes of "The world, the language of God" (82). In addition, although the kind of poet-priest proposed in this

version of the substitutionary model would appear to render actual priests redundant, the poet is an intermediary who relies heavily on what can only be described as divine inspiration, which comes intermittently in the form of an epiphanic “flash of light” (*Atlantis* 12). This Dudek is the same passive, seemingly modest figure who can write such lines as, “I go to drink coffee, expecting nothing, / hoping that the gods are kind” (*Atlantis* 12). Like the “hidden springs” that bring Pratt’s poetry to life, the reservoir of inspiration informing Dudek’s later verse is also described in quasi-spiritualist language “as coming from an underground stream, a poetic gurgle that goes on behind the other concerns of life” (*Continuation I* 7); in other words, it is an unpredictable and independent source of creative energy, if not an out-and-out religious one. As Dudek notes elsewhere, this dynamic means that the artist is reduced to a mouthpiece: “the artist cannot be proud, for it is not he himself who has been the source of that greatness. It is something larger than his own ego, that is the source of power. He is only a voice, an expression of a larger nature” (“The Idea of Art” 31). In such a view, the poet is not an active agent of change, a legislator, or genius, but a kind of messenger or servant beholden to “a larger nature” or Godlike “source of power.”

What is more, the substitutionary model fails Dudek because he rarely confuses religion with art—again, art is only “the vehicle that has carried and contained” what he calls “distilled religion” (“The Idea of Art” 14); it is only a tool or a guide, not the thing itself. Reacting against the idea of “pure art,” he offers unequivocal remarks about the substitutionary strategy championed by certain Romantic poets and proponents of *l’art pour l’art*:

I do not share the view of Mallarmé, that art as replacement for religion stands

upon an existential vacuum, that poetry creates its own aesthetic order upon nothingness, as an absolute fiction. Art as I see it stands upon a deeper order, which is unknowable to us, and it is a correlative to some degree of that deeper order. This is what R.L. Gregory calls “the deep structure of the world,” in his book *Mind and Science*, a structure which so far man has been unable to reach with his understanding. That is a religious view, to my mind, in which art serves as the mode of representation and understanding, so far as this is possible; it certainly does not place art above, or as a substitute for, religion. (*Notebooks* 69)

This distinction between art and religion, which informs similar comments in texts such as *Atlantis*, “The American Pavilion at Expo 67” (54-55), and *Notebooks 1960-1994* (54), also helps explain one of his principal reservations about Pound, a poet whom Dudek argues “would have us worship pure art, as a kind of religion, for the sake of civilization” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 175). Clearly, Dudek had little patience for Pound’s elevation of art to the status of religion, although in many ways he seemed, like Pound, to imagine himself as a high priest of sorts, a self-ordained cultural arbiter. Providing rationale for his rejection of Pound’s position, he simply notes, “Pure art is art trying to stand without any religious support. That is not possible” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 175).

Dudek’s poetics is therefore reinforced, once again, by his personal philosophy of religion. And both his poetics and his own poetry find fault with the Romantics and their heirs for “dropping the ballast of reason, reality (prose matter)” in favour of “pure art” or “mystic / revelation” (“Functional Poetry” 4). That is, because of his understanding of the separation of art and religion, Dudek must reject the art *qua* religion of figures such as

Pound as well as any art that touts itself as the unfiltered product of religious or mystical experiences. In a review that might be read as the pragmatic extension of his “Functional Poetry” manifesto, he provides a concrete reason for his objection to the latter kind of art: “I believe that the recreation of poetry as a great continuing art depends on a successful artistic crystallization and heightening of rational experience, not on a tragic submergence in the unconscious” (“Those Damned Visionary Poets” 166). Accordingly, Dudek’s criticism is replete with repudiations of a wide range of artistic and social groups that, in his mind, were predicated on some kind of “tragic submergence,” including surrealism, drug culture, Beat poetry, and much postmodernist literature. Of course, Dudek’s “Functional Poetry” was one of his correctives to such species of anti-rationalist thought, as was his interpretation of art as one of the tools with which human beings can approach Atlantis, as the essence of true religion. After a churchgoing scene in *Atlantis*, the persona observes that “great art touches something stronger and more compelling / than anything in life we touch or see” (64). This short excerpt is significant insofar as it is representative not only of Dudek’s functional poetics, but also of his ideas about art and religion. First, it highlights his understanding that art is not itself that “something stronger and more compelling.” As he explained to Steve McCaffery and other interlocutors in an interview, “the only way that we can know Atlantis is through the fragments and the appearances that lie before us, one sample of which is a piece of art” (“Questions [Some Answers]” 25).<sup>170</sup> Second, that mysterious “something stronger” is transcendental; it is not to be found in the here and now, in the “life we touch or see”—although it can be “touch[ed]” or glimpsed through “great” art. For Dudek, then, art should exist in a

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170. Later, Dudek would take this statement a step further with reference to his own art, remarking that “poetry is the best proof” of this transcendental reality or “deeper world”

symbiotic relationship with religion, which it cannot and does not attempt to replace; in his ideal civilization, all of the arts are integrated (*Atlantis* 61, 84), collectively overcoming “the split between too-much-seriousness and too-much-triviality, between ascetic religion and hedonistic life, between high art and low entertainment” (“Art, Entertainment and Religion” 173). That is, the arts are capable of illuminating and orienting us towards an ultimate reality while eschewing certain undesirable elements of institutional religion, such as its putative disavowal of earthly pleasures or its lack of a sense of humour.<sup>171</sup>

In multiple ways, then, one can see how the strategy of substitution is incompatible with Dudek’s poetics and philosophy of religion. And yet one must ask: does Dudek’s *Atlantis* itself become a closed mythological system that effectively functions as a substitute for religion? Critics such as Francis have noted that, in *Europe*, the sea “comes . . . close to acting as an archetype for him” (“Critic of Life” 22). However, Dudek is emphatic on this point: in an interview with Laurence Hutchman, he claims to adopt *Atlantis* and synonyms such as “paradise” simply as “large metaphors,” not as fixed myths or archetypes (“Interview” 157). To be sure, Dudek does switch effortlessly between these signifiers, which suggests that the signifiers themselves are inconsequential, pointing as they do to the same idea of God or to the same idea of plenitude and unknowability. By contrast, Dudek views myths as arbitrary superimpositions, as attempts to neatly explain away the world through crude generalizations. The substitution of myth for religion is actually what Dudek accuses

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(“The Discovery” 21, 14).

171. See Dudek’s “Arts, Entertainment and Religion” for extended commentary on the function of art as something that is “antithetical to the religious morality” (172). For his



Frye of doing in *The Great Code*: in “The Bible as Fugue: Themes and Variations,” he alleges that Frye has constructed a church of his own—“not merely a church among the other churches, but one that was to replace the rest as the one ‘definitive’ structure” (128)—and he goes on to say of Frye’s mythical model of interpretation that “the entire system, which began by dissociation from doctrine, inevitably presents itself as doctrine at the end of the work” (133). In order to avoid this contradiction, Dudek submits the idea of a pluralistic and unknowable universe much like the one imagined by James, with Dudek’s emphasis on the unrealizability of his utopian vision echoing the famous “Ever not quite” refrain of James’s *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909); he does not offer Atlantis as a doctrine capable of adequately explaining the whole world, or even his own world. Indeed, as his interview with Hutchman and his judgement of Frye demonstrate, Dudek was sensitive not only to the ways in which his idiosyncratic vision of Atlantis could be misconstrued as a self-contained hermeneutic or mythology, but also to the perceived irony of giving his unknown and unknowable ultimate reality a definitive, historically rooted name. The label of “Atlantis” seems to have attracted him largely because of his obsession with ancient Greek civilization and particularly with the Ionian philosophers he discusses in *The Birth of Reason*, who were, in Dudek’s estimation, resolutely “unmythical” in their thinking (69).<sup>172</sup>

#### **4.5 “SEARCHLIGHTS SCANNING FOR A DEFINITION OF THE ETERNAL”: ATLANTIS, ATOMISM, AND STRATEGIES OF ADAPTATION**

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views about the church’s apparent lack of a sense of humour, see, for example, *Atlantis* (50).

172. This kind of escape from mythological thinking is, in fact, precisely what Dudek means when he refers—in the title of his book and elsewhere—to “the birth of reason.” Above all, this new order signaled a shift away from exclusively mythical modes of thinking about the gods.

“(If I were to say what I ‘believe’ as standing behind these symbolic and mythological elements—Atlantis, the sea, epiphany, the gods—I would say that I cannot profess a committed belief, but that these words are searchlights scanning for a definition of the eternal. Once there was polytheism and human or animal sacrifice; then there was one God, then Jesus and the Trinity—Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit being a new and complex unity—then there were transcendental views of nature and reality, in which ‘the ideal is real.’ So today we are seeking to reconcile positive science with transcendental romanticism, to escape a sterile and reductive negation.)”  
(Dudek, “In a Nutshell” 117)

“We should renew, but all the same  
make something new.”  
(Dudek, *Atlantis* 75)

Instead of elimination or substitution, Dudek’s principal religious strategy is, ultimately, one of adaptation; his poetry adapts atomism, Christian prayer and other religious forms or rituals, and Romantic idealism, among other things. What I identify here as his adaptive strategy is behind what Davey calls his “evolved modernism which seeks a transcendental vision expressed in temporal form and idiom and rooted in the here and now” (*Louis Dudek* 162). Nevertheless, neither this adaptive strategy nor Dudek’s “evolved modernism” has been analyzed in great detail for its religious rather than its strictly poetic significance, and his writings on atomism, in particular, have been ignored completely—despite the fact that his adaptation of atomist philosophy is central to much of his poetic practice and religious thought.<sup>173</sup> Moreover, his creative reimagining of Atlantis and his efforts to adapt atomist philosophy place him firmly in line with an established modernist tradition of religious adaptation. As Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam

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173. In this section, I am concerned only with several of the adaptive, religious elements of Dudek’s atomist philosophy. However, a substantial but more general critical survey of atomism in his poetry and poetics would be a very welcome addition to Dudek studies. Even the early poem “A Sprig of Fir,” from *East of the City* (1946), contains a reference

Hammond, and Alexandra Peat observe in their macro-analytical study *Modernism: Keywords*, “words we expected to be disappearing (‘God’) were in strong circulation, or being translated into other terms” (xiv). And Dudek was just one of many modernists who “sought to translate God into other terms” (101); some, like Stevens, sought to invent a “Supreme Fiction” with which they could effectively translate the idea of God from a religious into a secular imaginary, while others, like Pratt, embraced theological modernism and Christian-spiritualist syncretisms as part of a complex and shifting strategy of adaptation.

But even Stevens briefly toyed with adaptation. Mutter notes that “Stevens’s first option, adaptation, is a revisionist strategy. One takes what began as a religious concept and prunes it, reinterprets it, or translates it in the light of ‘modern knowledge’” (743). This kind of contemporary reinterpretation is exactly what Dudek attempts to do with the philosophical-religious concepts of the atomists, although he does not set out, like Stevens, with the belief that such concepts must necessarily be articulated outside of a religious framework. Still, like the theological modernists of Pratt’s time, Dudek finds fault with the Christian church writ large for refusing to acknowledge its syncretistic and adaptive origins. He is quick to point out Christianity’s hypocrisy regarding atomism in particular: “contemporary scholars hold ancient atomism in deep aversion, and are highly reluctant to link the insights of the ancient philosophers to modern scientific thought” (*Birth of Reason* 41). “If you applied the same approach to the teaching of Jesus,” he continues, “Christianity would collapse still-born before your eyes, being rooted in ancient Judaic thought; but the idea of motion and development must be applied to ideas

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to atoms as a source of mystery (11), therefore foreshadowing his later writing and its more direct treatment of atomist themes.

as well as to things, following Aristotle’s reasoning” (41). According to Dudek, this “idea of motion and development” was granted to Platonism, because Platonism could be reconciled easily with Christian theology—and yet, arbitrarily, this same idea was denied to atomist philosophy until the Renaissance, when atomist ideas gradually reemerged, after roughly fifteen hundred years of censorship, and began to exert an influence not so much on religion or the arts, but on the modern sciences. To address these past injustices and intellectual lapses, Dudek’s religious strategy—in *Atlantis* and other poems from both before and after the publication of *The Birth of Reason*—is to make atomism new, to apply atomism and what he saw as the essential fragments or rhetorically useful forms of other poetic, philosophical, and religious traditions to contemporary life. The product of such adaptive, syncretistic processes is an idiosyncratic personal religion inherited from the ancient atomists but informed by Dudek’s encounters with modern intellectual currents.

Because atomism’s core texts survive only as fragments, part of Dudek’s project of recovering atomism as a viable philosophy and religious worldview necessarily involves re-introducing atomism and atomist ideas to the general public—which is precisely what he sets out to do in *The Birth of Reason*. In this slim but ambitious volume, Dudek defines atomism as a monist “theory of ultimately indivisible particles” that is concerned with identifying “what *substance* underlies the visible, tangible world before us” (x; emphasis in original). In Dudek’s poetry and prose, however, this concern is not expressed narrowly as a scientific problem, but as a wide-ranging philosophical inquiry into the existential and pragmatic applications of such a theory—and Dudek does not equivocate regarding atomism’s value: “Atomism is still one of the greatest and most

far-reaching ideas that man has ever had. It is still sparking, exploding, with many new revelations” (95). That atomism is of interest to Dudek for its religious import is also evident immediately: the book’s preface, sub-titled “Four Stages of Religion,” describes atomism as the final stage of religious development in a sequence beginning with animism, polytheism, and monotheism (x). At this juncture, Dudek provides a fuller definition of atomism, and it is one which clearly accords with his own religious views:

Precisely at the same time that monotheism emerged in Greece, however, a fourth alternative, and ultimately the most significant of all, had already been found, in the Ionian city of Miletus, on the southern coast of Asia Minor. This is the idea that not a god, a creator, existing separate and outside the universe, is the ultimate reality, but a process working within the matter and form of the universe itself is the source of things, that this is the proper object of knowledge, and the frontier of mystery. (x)

Phrases such as “ultimate reality,” “a process working within the matter and form of the universe,” and “frontier of mystery” recur regularly in Dudek’s writing: this same creative “process” is most often what he means by “God” or “the gods.” And although this passage would suggest that he employs terms such as “God” or “gods” as metaphors for a divine process rather than an anthropomorphic deity of any kind, he also appears to use them because he feels compelled to affirm, even to worship, the force or entity to which this metaphor refers; Dudek’s poetry often dramatizes a kind of mental genuflection, reading less as a denial of God than a redefinition and redirection of the idea of God—or of religion and religious experiences—into other than the usual channels. Ironically, though, atomism seems to entice Dudek precisely because its growth

was halted before its religious suppositions could spread and canker as inflexible tenets or theologies (*Birth of Reason* xi).

In any case, Dudek affirms and articulates atomism's religious value in other ways, and in texts other than *The Birth of Reason*. In the F.R. Scott Lecture he gave at McGill University in 1991, for instance, he asserts that "the one important meaning of atomism, whether in the ancient world or today, is that it frees us from mythological conceptions of nature, from the idea of some God or gods pulling the strings with a hidden purpose. Everything is contained in the atoms" ("What Do You Have Against Myth?" 147).<sup>174</sup> Note, however, that Dudek adapts atomist philosophy for his own poetic purposes, abandoning the atomists' search for "ultimately indivisible particles" (*Birth of Reason* x) and continuing to use charged words such as "God," "Atlantis," and "atoms" metaphorically and pragmatically to refer to an ultimate reality "for which there is as yet no myth and no concept" ("What Do You Have Against Myth?" 148). As well, those familiar with Dudek's writing will likely be surprised to learn that many of the "Thirty-nine Essential Fragments' from the Presocratics" reprinted in *The Birth of Reason* (23) closely resemble ideas espoused in Dudek's own writing, such as Anaximander's speculations regarding the "infinite nature" of a "first principle and primary element" that "contains all the worlds" (24); Pythagoras's comments on how "all living things should be regarded as akin" (25); Xenophanes's remarks on the unknowability of "the gods" or ultimate reality (25); or even Heraclitus's contention that "The most beautiful world . . . is like a heap of rubbish aimlessly piled up" (27). In the case of this last fragment, for example, one finds a rather striking analogue in *Atlantis*, where Dudek proclaims that "the world" is "one vast slum," "a rich garbage dump," but nevertheless attributes to it "a

ghostly beauty” (22). With such examples in mind, one might even argue that the atomist fragments quoted in *The Birth of Reason* constitute the “fragments of a new religion” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 180) that Dudek believed himself to have shored against the ruins of modern society.

Dudek’s complaints about the trajectory of this modern society and its literature can also be expressed in the context of his adaptation of atomist philosophy as a response to two distinct forms of Romanticism. He discusses one of these, “romantic pessimism,” with reference to writers such as Giacomo Leopardi, Gérard de Nerval, and Samuel Beckett (*Ideas for Poetry* 15), and the other, more recent variety—which Robert Genter labels “romantic modernism” throughout his *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*—with reference to writers such as Allen Ginsberg or other Beat Generation poets, as well as many postmodernists. He finds fault with both species of writer, the Romantic pessimist and the Romantic modernist, for failing to deliver “a new serious interpretation of life, neither trivial nor orthodox in religion” (“Arts, Entertainment and Religion” 173): the Romantic pessimists, because they are too heavily invested in a substitutionary strategy that proves unequal to the task of replacing or even reinventing religion on a large scale (173), and the Romantic modernists of the mid-twentieth century, because their acceptance of “teen-age sentimentality and the drug experience” results in a primitive, naturalized, or otherwise impoverished view of the world (“Reality in the Arts” 17-18).<sup>175</sup> As Dudek argues in reference to the Romantic modernists and other writers of his own, increasingly secular era, “The real problem, with

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174. For a similar argument, see Dudek’s *Notebooks: 1960-1994* (204-05).

175. As Dudek puts it, the Romantic modernists of the second half of the twentieth century embraced “what we may call the unimaginative view of existence” (“Reality in the Arts” 18; emphasis in original).

modern secularism, is the unimportance of reality—the utter triviality into which things fall when they are merely things, objects of the senses and the working reason” (“Reality in the Arts” 15; emphasis in original). The end result of this logic is that, once you have placed value on everything equally, denying God or the idea of God, there can be nothing better or worse than anything else—and for Dudek, this is intolerable and devastating for religion, but also for society as a whole.

Of course, when Dudek writes that “Nothing in nature is ever trivial” (“Reality in the Arts” 16), he is not elevating the trivial, the everyday, in order to make it transcendental—which is what Genter maintains that the Romantic modernists did “in a desperate attempt to respiritualize the world by making the ordinary extraordinary” (15); he is actually saying that the trivial does not exist, which leads to “a kind of transcendence-in-immanence” à la Stevens (Mutter 762). As Dudek elucidates, “The transcendental, in my meaning, is the full reality of things, it is the unknowable and the known as an ever-present mystery, standing before us” (*Notebooks* 221). In *Atlantis*, this affirmation of the here and now appears at several points of Dudek’s journey, such as when he juxtaposes descriptions of “a man throwing up his guts” and Montmartre’s “dim hotels / and sad soliciting girls” with the rather Nietzschean claim that “paradise is here or it is nowhere . . .” (89); or when he observes that “All the infinities, perfections, / ecstasies, all magnificence— / belong to man” (96) before channeling Carl Sandburg in a modernist paean to “a brass-plate cleaner oiling his elbows,” “singing workmen on a high rigging,” and “an efficient traffic cop” (97). “Hell is a human place,” he concludes, “but so is heaven” (97). For Stevens, at least, such instances of transcendence-in-immanence render traditional notions of God or of heaven nugatory: “To experience the world as



sufficient, even as a plenitude,” Mutter writes, “is to repudiate the intuition he, following William James, thought the beginning of religious consciousness; namely, that there is something wrong with the world, and that our difficulty here means we must refer our discontented desire to something ‘beyond’ in order to render it intelligible and relieve our misery” (749). However, by embracing atomism as a revelation of reality’s infinite and awe-inspiring capacity for creativity—that is, by locating the transcendental in the here and now—Dudek can affirm the world “as sufficient, even as a plenitude” without having to jettison God or the idea of God. Such assertions appear throughout his poetic oeuvre, both before and after *Atlantis*, in the form of atomist affirmations, of which the following are only a small sampling:

The forms of beauty are many.

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A Turkish sword-hilt, very elaborate,  
and a Byzantine church filled with mosaics,  
are each a manifestation  
of infinite creativity (of nature, the gods in us)[.] (*Europe* 115)

God is the beauty of order sometimes visible

Man is a part of that,

like flower, bird, or galaxy (*Continuation I* 54)

Nature creates by building on what is there.

It finds infinite possibility in the actual and the real.

(“Going the Whole Way” 14-15)

Yet God’s glory was built into the molecules

All prepared in the beginning (*Continuation II* 21)

These quotations resonate with the atomist fragments excerpted above, certainly, and with the Jamesian sense of sufficiency and plenitude that Mutter detects in some of Stevens’s poetry. Additionally, however, they accord with ideas found in many of Dudek’s essays, interviews, and notebooks. In an interview with Louise Schrier, for example, he says, “I believe that the great, wonderful, paradisaic reality called ‘Atlantis’ is not somewhere out there, not somewhere in the Provence or in ancient China, but is right here. It is in the actual, always changing and moving and transforming itself” (“Breathless Adventure” 44). As this isolated but representative passage suggests, atomist notions of flux and immanence subtend Dudek’s Atlantis, and yet, because his poetry frequently couches them in religious language that gestures to an infinite and utopian reality beyond what is or what can be known, they nevertheless acquire an unmistakably transcendental quality.

Dudek’s view of all reality as meaningful, as something patterned upon a hidden order, is also a form of natural theology—although, because it is derived from atomist philosophy, it is of a different variety than the kind of natural theology prevalent among the Canadian Confederation poets, whose credo E.K. Brown summarizes as “God is in nature; and nature is good. Man is a part of nature; and has no quarrel with it” (50). Unlike the effusive, pantheistic revelations of many Confederation poets, Dudek’s

epiphanies rarely stem from tranquil recollections of sentimentalized Canadian landscapes. Instead, Dudek's atomist natural theology is compatible with James's philosophy of religion in *Varieties*, since it is not a completely neutralized form of scientific materialism of the kind James detested; like James, he advocates for a middle way, and his form of atomism similarly avoids two dogmatic extremes, the Scylla of "church religion" and the Charybdis of "laboratory science" ("Nationalism" 268):

[Atomism] must be understood as a further attempt, the latest and most far-reaching, at understanding the nature of things, that is, to conceive the creation in its fullest dimensions. The infinite reality is there to be known and understood, that is, to be translated into some form that the human mind can grasp and find plausible. That is why we have developed the hunger of thought, in religion as well as in science. There is no inherent conflict between any of these modes of thought. (*Birth of Reason* 78)

As we have seen, too, Dudek's atomist poetics—which puts into practice his desire to harmonize religious and scientific perspectives—does not insist on naturalizing or eliding religious vocabularies and experiences, since the monist presupposition of the scientific materialists seems incapable of eroding his view of nature as a limitless and ultimately unknowable source of meaning and inspiration. The natural world, interpreted in the broadest possible terms, is for Dudek the ultimate "open secret" (Ruiz Sánchez 110) or "text" to be read, and he reads it through a religious lens: he contends that "This world could be God's autobiography, / a vast Bildungsroman / with billions of characters, plots and settings" (*Continuation II* 112). Although he purportedly told his students to "Spend an hour or two every week reading one of the great religious texts of the past—the

Upanishads, the Talmud, the Koran, the writings of Lao Tze, Confucius, Mencius, the New and the Old Testament,” he also told them that “the great works of religion are not necessary. The work of the creation is always before us, to be read and interpreted” (“Reality in the Arts” 19). As some of the previous quotations about the divinity and limitlessness of nature intimate, Dudek prefers this latter theological approach, commonly known as natural theology, to the former, revealed theology. In natural theology, one must actively work towards revelations and extract meaning from external sources, which resonates with Hildebrand’s contention that, for Dudek, “Epiphanic moments in poetry, like civilization itself, must be earned” (93). In Dudek’s poetic renderings of atomist philosophy, the poet must interpret the world, revealing God in and through nature; indeed, in “The Bible as Fugue,” Dudek’s comments on Heinz R. Pagels’s *The Cosmic Code: Quantum Physics as the Language of Nature* tacitly indicates that the natural theological perspective is one of the things he values most in the atomists’ writings.

In addition to adapting atomist philosophy and Romantic idealism, Dudek also adapts the language and forms of Christianity, even while rejecting most of the church’s foundational theological and institutional assertions of authority. Again, that he is interested in adapting rather than simply criticizing Christianity is clear enough: he writes, “I have a high regard and a personal attachment to Christianity, as every thinking person must have, especially one who is born and bred within the Christian community, but I must look squarely at the rigidities of the past, in questions of belief, and correct some of their distortions” (*Birth of Reason* 79).<sup>176</sup> However, Dudek was also aware that

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176. It is important to note that this kind of declaration is somewhat of an anomaly in Dudek’s writing. He is typically more interested in chronicling the faults than the virtues

he was not alone in his attempts to “correct” religion. In fact, he scapegoats Frye, critiquing him for some of the “transformations” effected by Eliot’s “mythical method” of interpretation (“*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*” 178): he protests that, in *The Great Code*, “Almost every traditional term gets retranslated by this new method into some new formulation. The doctrine of original sin, so deep-dyed in old theology, becomes ‘fear of freedom’” (“The Bible as Fugue” 129). On the surface, Dudek’s retranslation of “God” into non-Christian contexts appears hypocritical in the light of such accusations. In many of his attacks on a generalized, pan-historic Christianity, he seems to temporarily forget the idea—which he himself suggests on multiple occasions in *The Birth of Reason*—that religions change; there is no single Christianity, nor even a single “ascetic moral ideal of Christianity” (“Art, Entertainment and Religion” 180). In other words, Christianity is not monolithic, nor is the language of Christian discourse fixed. That said, Dudek’s critique of Frye must be read with an eye to his overriding concern, his resistance to closed myths or systems of thought. In this light, Dudek seems to be objecting primarily to Frye’s codification of a particular mythology (namely, his own), not to his desire to adapt religious truths to make them relevant in a rapidly changing world.

One of the primary ways that Dudek adapts Christianity is by recycling the language and forms of Christian prayer. In *Continuation II*, for example, one can see how he melds atomist notions of the indestructability of matter with corresponding Christian sentiments about the body returning to the earth (Gen. 3.19; Eccles. 3.20; Ps. 103.14):

Lord, let me have wings

in my late years, when baldness comes

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of institutional Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, so as to make plain “the sad history of these religions” (“The Bible as Fugue” 131).

Open my skull to heaven like a mirror

Let me think nothing but

eternal thoughts, out of that dust a gravel,

the ashes of existence

Make new hope possible, for future birds

Laugh at wounds, tear all obstacles aside

and show, naked, the creative chromosomes. (13)

Drawing on the conventions of Christian prayer, Dudek's appeal to the "Lord" is paired with a series of injunctions or requests (such as "let me have," "Open my skull," "Let me think," "Make new hope possible"). Yet Dudek's comments on how the "ashes of existence" are reconstituted in various forms—as "gravel," or perhaps even as "future birds"—call to mind an atomist fragment from Diogenes of Apollonia, which states "that all existing things are alterations of the same thing and are the same thing" (*Birth of Reason* 31). Significantly, however, this kind of monist, atomist sentiment appears in Dudek's poetry long before *The Birth of Reason*. In *En México*, the itinerant poet catalogues the beauty and diversity of the world around him, repeatedly inviting the reader to "Praise" reality in its various forms before adding a Diogenes-esque note of clarification: "Between cathedral spires / and the plum tree's pleasantness / there is no distinction. / Praise these" (36).

Such passages, which contribute to *En México*'s reverent and incantatory tone, have lead critics such as Seidner to observe somewhat generally, and without reference to

Dudek's later atomist preoccupation, that "His rejoicing has a religious quality" (28). In any case, many of Dudek's prayers operate on two seemingly irreconcilable planes: rhetorically, because they are addressed to a divine other, they imply that—as in modern Christianity—a personal relationship or line of communication exists between the speaker and an anthropomorphic deity; nevertheless, the content of these prayers is frequently more suggestive of atomist philosophy than Christian theology, which means that it is difficult to read the poet's prayerful addresses to a divine other through the lens of traditional religion. If not for Dudek's atomist convictions, such prayers seem to perform a merely rhetorical function. As Jahan Ramazani remarks in *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*, poems necessarily "incorporate the performativity of prayer but stand outside and inspect it; they give voice to prayer but fictionalize it" in "a ritual-like act that has been self-consciously aestheticized" (132-33). Coupled with the poet's atomist affirmations of an unidentifiable ultimate reality, however, the various prayers contained in Dudek's poetry do not negate prayer's religious value or pillage and redirect the language of prayer towards aesthetic ends. Instead, they serve as poetic experiments in which he attempts to find a language commensurate to his atomist philosophy of religion: for Dudek, embracing "the performativity of prayer" is an aesthetic as well as a religious gesture, one which enables him to profess his atomist beliefs in the familiar forms of religious petition while creating a provocative dissonance between the expected and actual content of the prayers themselves. In this way, Dudek's poetic invocations simultaneously confirm and call into question the efficacy of poetry as a vehicle for religious beliefs, thus validating Ramazani's claim that "modern and contemporary prayer-poems often make visible long-

standing, if often buried, frictions between prayer and poetry” (136). On one hand, the prayers in poems such as *En México* and *Continuation II* are “less addresses to the divine than images of such address, less petitions of the supernatural than self-scrutinizing commentaries on the figurative, rhetorical, and theological underpinnings of such petition” (Ramazani 183); on the other hand, Dudek’s atomist beliefs in an ultimate reality cannot be denied, so that any such instances of ironizing self-reflexivity<sup>177</sup> do little to dispel the reader’s sense that the “thirst for transcendence” (Ruiz Sánchez 120) informing his poetic petitions is genuine and, at times, apparently all-consuming.

As well, Dudek takes a perennialist approach to religion in that, like James, he seems committed to the idea of a universal truth at the heart of multiple religious traditions or practices: “What is most valuable in all religions is identical, and what is unique is of little worth,” he confidently proclaims (*Notebooks* 186). In this sense, and others, Dudek’s is also a pluralist approach to religion. First, both his poetry and prose, with their many references to Atlantis as the unknowable, or as reality’s unbounded creative potential, reinforce what Susan Dieleman calls “a *metaphysical* sense of pluralism, largely interchangeable with James’s use of ‘indeterminism,’ according to

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177. One such instance can be found at the end of *Atlantis*, where Dudek seems to subvert the language and forms of Christianity in a passage extolling “nothing” (150). This passage echoes the “nada” prayer of Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (58-59), an anti-prayer which repurposes the Lord’s Prayer as a kind of anthem of modernist nihilism or ennui. Even so, the fact that *Atlantis* was conceived as “an answer to the nihilism of modern literature” and “existential absurdism” (Dudek, “Louis Dudek” 139)—together with the poem’s affirmations of the beauty and meaning of reality in its various forms—suggests that this prayer-like portion of its Epilogue was likely intended as a parodic creed of sorts. While Ruiz Sánchez tentatively argues that the poem “ends with a final litany that vaguely reminds us of the ‘absolute detachment’ of certain Christian mystics or to the Buddhist mysticism of the void” (121), he does little to convince his readers of the validity of this reading in relation to, or as a rejection of, his previous affirmations of Atlantis as the symbol of his atomist beliefs.



which the world itself is composed of possibilities” (285; emphasis in original).<sup>178</sup> As Dudek argues in *Ideas for Poetry*, for instance, “All our thinking and science cannot get beyond this fact of the tentativeness and relativity of knowledge” (44). Even his own atomist philosophy must be subjected to constant revision, since atoms and sub-atomic particles such as the Higgs boson are merely imperfect metaphors we use to describe a reality we cannot see or fully comprehend: “There may be future representations that we cannot yet imagine,” he prophesies, “but they will not be much nearer to the ultimate reality than either of these metaphorical models at present suggest” (*Birth of Reason* 89).<sup>179</sup> To say, then, that Dudek’s atomist philosophy upholds either the ancient Greek philosophers’ “atoms” or modern quantum physics’ “elementary particles” as definitive models for describing reality, would be to misunderstand the metaphysically pluralist dimensions of his atomism and his art.

Second, his writing is pluralist in “an *experiential* sense,” to the extent that it “picks out the impossibility of capturing a ‘whole scene’ from just one perspective” (Dieleman 285; emphasis in original). In his poetry, Dudek’s pluralism manifests in this second, experiential sense by incorporating and synthesizing multiple religious perspectives—though perhaps never as aggressively or as obviously as Pound or even

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178. Dudek’s resistance to closure, and his concomitant embrace of openness and interrogation as critical practices integral to his poetics, corresponds to this first kind of Jamesian pluralism. For example, one of the reasons Dudek responds negatively to Frye, but also Freud and Jung, is that, in his view, these thinkers “fail to see that in great things the question is always more interesting than the answer. And it’s not that the question must remain unanswered, but that a definite answer should be postponed, or at best tentatively suggested” (*Ideas for Poetry* 17). Another example both of Dudek’s resistance to closure and his dislike of scientific certainty can be found in the essay “What Do You Have Against Myth?”, where he asserts, “we live in a world we do not understand at all. And to think that we have explained it, either by myth or by science, is the extreme of folly” (160).

179. Dudek makes a similar claim in *Ideas for Poetry* (78).

Eliot, whose *Four Quartets* reflects his persistent religious and aesthetic tendencies towards a kind of kleptomaniacal eclecticism. Seidner detects in *En México* a latent parallel between Dudek's ultimate reality and "the Chinese Tao" (28), for example, and this comparison seems warranted in light of Ruiz Sánchez's recent observation that early worksheets of the poem included the line, "Art is really Tao—"the way"" (qtd. in Ruiz Sánchez 63).<sup>180</sup> In *Atlantis*, Dudek also draws from holy books such as the Upanishads (109), and in an unpublished diary entry from 3 February 1968, Dudek advocates for a comparative approach to religion and the study of religious texts using the familiar arguments of the perennialists: "We should study daily and compare—the Koran, the Talmud, the Bible, the Upanishads & the Hindu & Buddhist scriptures, the Taoist books and the Confucian. All the literature that is directly related to these is the deepest literature; and all literature is more or less related. This is the center and the source of all knowledge."<sup>181</sup> In an undated but published diary entry, Dudek would haughtily complain of "World Religions" that "all of them dream of an oecumenical unity at the end of the rainbow," although, once again, his spleen seems to be directed not at religion per se, but at the political and social problems triggered by the institutionalization of religion, since "religions tend to split up into conflicting sects" (*Notebooks* 92).

Despite his pluralistic ideas about reality and religion, Dudek paradoxically embraces atomism as a philosophy capable of informing and reconciling—and therefore superseding—disparate religious traditions. Like the world religions he derides, he, too, dreams of "a larger synthesis, a religious view which would include all religions," while

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180. In published versions of *En México*, this line reads, "Art is really the way of life" (76).

181. Library and Archives Canada, Louis Dudek fonds, LMS-0167 1990-07, "Series 1. Personal," "Sub-series B. Diaries and Notebooks," Box 1, File 6, manuscript, 1968-1969.

also stating that “a tolerance for private belief (the very opposite of the universal) would be even better” (*Notebooks* 116). That is, his personal atomist religion is not a system meant to eliminate or replace existing religious traditions so much as it is a series of provisional, open-ended claims about the nature of reality that he leverages to distil each down to a shared pre-doctrinal essence. Curiously, this use of atomism as a kind of perennialist superstructure—or foundation, depending on the analogy—is exactly in line with James’s pluralism, as outlined by James O. Pawelski: in James’s philosophy of religion, he writes, “each individual must have the freedom to build his or her own idiosyncratic religious structure on the universal foundation. Individuals as diverse as Emerson, Whitman, Wesley, and Moody must all be allowed to build on this foundation. Only in this way is it possible to maintain the fullness and variety of the human experience of the divine” (21). In an early review of *Atlantis*, Paul Denham seems to arrive at a similar conclusion—although he mistakenly identifies Platonism, not atomism, as the key to Dudek’s pluralistic philosophy, describing the poet’s notion of Atlantis as “a vision of a kind of Platonic reality underlying the dizzying multiplicity of human experience” (234).

To be sure, Dudek’s personal religion is a syncretistic mix, and his own language inevitably carries traces of other religious and philosophical traditions, including Platonism. But this heady religious cocktail is one which comes together outside of an institutional framework, as well as one which challenges binaries such as Émile Durkheim’s sacred-profane distinction in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Seidner seems to intuit as much when she comments on how “The order that informs the jungle” in *En México* “dissolves the distinction between religious and secular realities”

(22). However, while Seidner refers briefly to Dudek’s adaptation of “Herakleitan philosophy” (35), she does not seem aware of Dudek’s atomism, and her claim about Dudek’s radical dissolution of the religious-secular dichotomy is premised on a version of the substitutionary thesis—admittedly borrowed from Francis (“Critic of Life” 17)—in which the dichotomy between religion and art is resolved only insofar as it is collapsed in a secularized framework.<sup>182</sup> More delicately, Dudek’s atomism acknowledges the ways in which the categories of the religious and the secular are necessarily intertwined but need not compete.

As well, atomism’s very resistance to fixity—in terms of physical reality or dogma—means that, even if atomism were not censored and thus largely excised from the Western intellectual tradition, it still may not have come to resemble what many modernists, or what many people living today, would recognize as an organized religion. And whereas “Stevens was often ambivalent towards the work of adaptation”—presumably because “It raises questions of legitimacy and coherence that force one to ask whether originally religious ideas remain authentic or intelligible in an alien framework” (Mutter 743-44)—Dudek had no qualms about adopting and adapting atomism as something that allowed him to discuss religious issues in the putatively secular and hyper-rational contexts supplied by certain twentieth-century literary and scientific discourses; atomism’s historical marginalization by the Christian Church and its reappearance in post-Enlightenment scientific circles meant that it did not appear out of place in the “alien framework” of modern secular imaginaries.

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182. Seidner actually suggests that it is not religion that had “a direct and profound impact on [Dudek’s] poetic concerns,” but, more precisely, his “*rejection* not only of

## 4.6 CONCLUSION

In “Religion and Literature” (1935), Eliot wrote: “For the great majority of people who love poetry, ‘religious poetry’ is a variety of *minor* poetry” (99; emphasis in original). But Eliot was, of course, talking about poets whose works and audiences are limited rather than enlarged by their preoccupation with religious issues. As this chapter suggests, Dudek is clearly not a “religious” poet in this diminished sense. My intention, in titling this chapter, is not to render Dudek a minor poet—for that process has been occurring organically enough, and for quite some time, in Canadian classrooms and academic circles—but rather the very opposite: to provoke new discussions of perhaps the most neglected facets of an impressive and far-reaching oeuvre, one which elicited praise from such renowned figures as Pound, Williams, Marianne Moore, and Ginsberg.<sup>183</sup> Moreover, by introducing some of the salient aspects of Dudek’s atomist-inflected personal religion, I mean to invite further consideration of the ways in which the designation “religious poet” might be said to denote a widening rather than a narrowing of perspective, insofar as unorthodoxly religious poetry such as Dudek’s speaks to the plight of countless other twentieth-century individuals who struggled to reconcile the trends of secularization and anti-institutionalism with their own unflagging interest in the

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Catholicism but of all organized religion” (15; emphasis added).

183. Texts such as “A Note on Metrics” and “Functional Poetry” speak to Dudek’s influence outside of Canada, as well as his ability to bridge the gap between high modernists and late-modernists or postmodernists. Dudek’s *Dk/ Some Letters of Ezra Pound* references notes of appreciation from writers such as Pound and Moore (139), but his fonds at Library and Archives Canada (LMS-0167 1990-07) also contains postcards or notes of appreciation from many literary figures, including Williams (“Series 2. Correspondence,” “Sub-series B. Professional Correspondence,” Box 20, File 6, 1958, typescript) and Ginsberg (“Series 2. Correspondence,” “Sub-series B. Professional Correspondence,” Box 10, File 30, 1959, manuscript).

idea of God.

One of the limitations of this chapter is its somewhat unbalanced focus on *Atlantis* at the expense of, say, the later *Continuation* poems. As I have intimated throughout, Dudek's ideas about God and atomism manifest in those texts, as well. But, as the first section of this chapter also intimates, *Atlantis* is a vitally important text for Dudek on multiple levels: it introduces the idea of an "infinite" poem; it marks the beginning of his fascination with the dramatization of consciousness, which would shape his later *Continuation* poems and late poetics, without becoming as "potentially incoherent" as *Continuation* itself (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 245); and, most significantly for my purposes, *Atlantis* marks the point at which Dudek's poetry is most "functional" in its articulation of his inextricably linked poetics and religious views. In the words of Ruiz Sánchez, "*Atlantis* is the long poem by Dudek that best exemplifies the author's desire to find the difficult equilibrium between lucidity and lyricism" (87). Similarly, Davey admits that "The poem corresponds almost exactly to the aesthetic and moral theories it propounds" (*Louis Dudek* 76)—and I would agree: its epigrams, allusions, fragmentation, and colloquial language can all be examined productively, to an extent that has not been possible here, with reference both to the functional yet increasingly experimental poetics through which Dudek explores the idea of God, and to the strategy of adaptation according to which he articulates his unique perspective on atomist philosophy. First drafted in 1961,<sup>184</sup> *Atlantis* is perhaps the most pivotal poem not only in terms of Dudek's dramatic aesthetic development from the 1950s through the 1960s, as several critics have already suggested,<sup>185</sup> or his poetry's reception,<sup>186</sup> but also in terms of his emphasis on

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184. See "Beyond Autobiography" (81) and "Questions (Some Answers)" (10).

185. See, for example, Gnarowski, Barbour (21), and Trehearne (*Montreal Forties* 240).

ultimate reality, which would become one of his central concerns from this point forward.

As in Pratt and Avison, there is, in much of Dudek's writing, a fundamental and partially unresolved tension between his private vision and his public-facing poetry. Although the kind of religious truths Dudek preaches must be earned by individuals on a kind of spiritual adventure or quest, his personal religion is also one which invites transformation on a broad scale—often via art. Yet he is particularly keen on the art of exceptional individuals, such as those featured in James's *Varieties*, for whom religious and artistic inspiration alike graces “*individual men in their solitude*” (31; emphasis in original); Dudek, like James, “wants the pattern setter, not the pattern” (Richardson 392)—and he clearly imagines himself as a religious radical or pioneer in his own way. Late in his life, he would write, “When I say that ‘monotheism is not the last word,’ and I pursue a religious vision of the creative universe beyond monotheism, I feel that I am entirely alone, at the frontier of human knowledge, the whole question as I see it open and spreading before me. In fact, I do not think there is anyone at present who would understand what I am saying, or can be expected to understand” (*Notebooks* 174). This is personal religion in its most extreme. According to this claim, at least, no one shares—or can share—his religious perspective. Little wonder, then, that Atlantis occasionally appears, as it does to critics such as Len Gasparini (539) and Ruiz Sánchez (160), a rather esoteric religious vision. This Atlantis is not a society so much as a “high point” reached by individuals working towards their own truth: “It can never be a collective belief” (“Bible as Fugue” 134). As Dudek says in *The First Person in Literature*, “the collective

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186. As Goldie notes, “By the publication of *Atlantis* in 1967, the ambivalent critic had become *de rigeur*” (15). Goldie is one such representative critic: he lauds Dudek's editorial work for *Delta* “as Dudek's major contribution to Canadian culture” (35), yet he

belief is no longer true for the emancipated individual” (11); or, as he remarks in *Atlantis*, not all are “citizens of Atlantis” (10). In other words, not all are capable, like Dudek, of tapping into the ultimate reality that Atlantis represents: “You can’t judge a city or a people by the common lot / or the popular arts” (*Atlantis* 19). Only the lone artistic “genius,” it seems, is capable of “bringing something of the divine back to a homeless universe” (*First Person* 56).<sup>187</sup> Yet, thanks to these benevolent geniuses, some hope remains for the common lot. Dudek insists, “We cannot give up while there is still hope that one or two might rise and begin the slow ascent toward freedom and self-realization. So we continue to criticize and to educate” (*Notebooks* 113). In Dudek’s absence, however, or in the absence of other self-proclaimed geniuses, the responsibility falls to others: the main body of *Atlantis* concludes with the lines, “It all comes down to this life of ours / of which you have the pieces / right in your hands” (142).

As Dudek seems to have suspected, though, the essential problem remains: there may be as many visions of Atlantis as there are people, since “We are separate universes, / cut off from the others” (*Atlantis* 133). Dudek is keenly aware of his own poetry’s inability to resolve the tension between personal religious convictions and the possibility of an objective, ultimate reality that transcends the self, as is demonstrated by his many attempts to effect a reconciliation through his own art. This kind of search for a new foundation or ground of meaning is frequently represented as “a search alone, a search for essential meaning” (“Ken Norris” 41). Still, I would argue that Dudek’s religious ideas and search for ultimate reality need not be developed “into a system of belief” (“Louis Dudek: Canada’s ‘Ideogram of Reality’” 152) in order to effect change on more

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is fairly critical of, or indifferent to, much of the poetry. For Dudek’s commentary on this shift in reception, see Stromberg-Stein (79-80).



than an individual level. On one hand, it is true that his poetry appears to corroborate Phillip E. Hammond's contention that "religion since the 1960s, to the degree it is important, is more likely to be *individually* important and less likely to be *collectively* important" (10-11; emphasis in original). On the other hand, however, most art is public-facing and therefore functional to some extent: as Dudek tells us, "A poem is not a solipsistic experience. It's got to communicate, and in the revising, that is what you try to do—make it speak for others also" ("Breathless Adventure" 50). In the final analysis, if one can speak of such things, one might argue that the public and functional dimensions of his art necessarily mitigate the private nature of his religion.

Dudek's engagement with the strategies of elimination, substitution, and adaptation sheds light on aspects of his long poems, lyrics, and prose. In this chapter, however, I have been less interested in mapping out a trajectory or tracing Dudek's development from the "apprenticeship" period of his early lyricism through each of his long poems, as Trehearne does (*Montreal Forties* 243), as I have been in foregrounding his interest in religion as a lens through which his other lifelong concerns come into focus. These concerns necessarily draw him into much larger socio-cultural and aesthetic debates, pointing to the broader implications—sometimes religious—of his public poetry and private musings. For example, the tension between "fragmentation and dislocation" and "coherence and order" that Trehearne sees as largely responsible for "the astonishing and eccentric beauty of modernist art" (*Montreal Forties* 318), Dudek's included, is a tension that also played out on the religious stage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as organized religions and comprehensive mythological explanations of the world jostled with a multiplicity of personal religions and with the iconoclastic, anti-

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187. Hildebrand makes a similar observation in "Poet of the 1990s" (90).

institutional, and occasionally nihilistic experiments of modernist and postmodernist writers. That is, these conflicting tendencies were operative in multiple spheres, often in mutually transformative ways. So, finally, I must return to my contention, voiced in previous chapters, that to acknowledge the tensions that attend the formation and dramatization of individual poets' personal religions is to acknowledge the interconnected nature of modernism's aesthetic and religious concerns.

The modernists were not generally known for their turn to institutional forms of religion (notable exceptions such as Eliot notwithstanding) so much as they were for secularization, for what the poet Robin Blaser, in his introduction to *Infinite Worlds: The Poetry of Louis Dudek*, refers to as an essentially postmodernist rejection of "authoritarian structures" (8). By this reckoning, and by my own account of Dudek's adapted atomism as a "practice of openness" (Blaser 8), his repeated embrace of a non-institutional, atypical form of religion could be considered both a modernist and a postmodernist gesture—which is, perhaps, to say that is neither, there being no single modernist or postmodernist response to the questions of religion. And perhaps it is only through the lens of atomism's descendent, quantum physics—in which matter can be described paradoxically both in terms of "waves" and discrete "particles"—that one can see how Canadian modernism itself is a plurality requiring better labels, better metaphors: while it has frequently been described in terms of distinct "waves" emanating from the nation's cultural capitals in the 1920s, the 1940s and 1950s, and the 1960s on, it can also be described in terms of the scattered poets and communities exploding unpredictably and unevenly within, but also beyond, modernism's expected temporal,

spatial, or intellectual bounds.<sup>188</sup> Dudek the 1940s social-realist poet and editor of *First Statement* certainly fits comfortably in narratives employing the former model, according to which he is rightly considered one of the most prominent figures of so-called second-wave Canadian modernism; nevertheless, it is equally clear that Dudek the atomist, Dudek the religious poet who rode the dissipating waves of modernism until his death in 2001, requires critics to consider anew not only his place in relation to dominant modernist, late-modernist, and postmodernist literary traditions, but also his contributions to the ongoing and widespread adaptation of religious thought in the twentieth century.

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188. For many years, the first model has been the dominant one, informing texts such as Ken Norris's *The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-80*, or even my own essay, "Towards the 'Infinite Poem': Reality and the Imagination in the 1950s and 1960s Meta-Poetry of Louis Dudek." Furthermore, the metaphor of the "wave" was also applied self-consciously in anthologies such as Souster's *New Wave Canada: The New Explosion in Canadian Poetry* (1966). After the rise of the New Modernist Studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the second model has become more common, if only as a supplement to the first.

**CHAPTER 5:  
THE FOURTH WAY: P.K. PAGE'S  
PLURALIST, PERENNIALIST SUFISM**

**5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In 1996, Susan McCaslin contacted P.K. Page, the almost-octogenarian poet and artist, to invite her to contribute to the anthology *A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, a veritable who's who of twentieth-century Canadian poets which included contributions from such luminaries as Miriam Waddington, Leonard Cohen, Robert Bringhurst, Lorna Crozier, and Sky Dancer Louise B. Halfe. Among the pages of McCaslin and Page's subsequent, unpublished correspondence is a fascinating and revealing document: a detailed questionnaire about Page's religious beliefs, which McCaslin originally intended to publish alongside selections of Page's poetry.<sup>189</sup> This document is revealing for several reasons, not least because it speaks to McCaslin's familiarity with some of the larger religious trends identified in the introduction to this dissertation. For Page's critics, though, this document is most revealing precisely because, whereas William James willingly completed J.B. Pratt's 1904 questionnaire on religion, filling its margins with his handwritten responses ("Answers to a Questionnaire" 1183-85), Page flatly refused to answer McCaslin's questions. In a letter to McCaslin dated 24 August 1996, she writes, "You may find this unlikely, but there is no way that I can answer the [questionnaire]. My head simply doesn't work that way. I am fascinated to know what others think, but reluctant even to

get into the part of my head that could address the issues. Crazy? Maybe.”<sup>190</sup> In an earlier letter to McCaslin, she had already hinted at the esoteric and highly personal nature of her beliefs, as if to prepare McCaslin for her later refusal: “I have no theory, no dogma, no belief system,” she explains. “I do think, however, that religion frequently has nothing to do with spirituality, and that what is called spirituality is too often emotionalism at best, indoctrination at worst.”<sup>191</sup>

In this chapter, I will argue that Page’s Sufism—as it manifests in her poetry, prose, and essays—does, in fact, approximate a “belief system”; it is simply a belief system predicated on a denial of the fact of its systematization. In other words, one might say that her Sufism purports to be exactly the kind of idealized, unmediated personal religion championed by James. Like many organized belief systems, however, the particular form of Sufism followed by Page (of which more soon) acknowledged and attempted to move towards an ultimate reality; it had an informal hierarchy, with an established leader and initiates at various stages of enlightenment; its prophets and its clerisy deployed recognizable, internally consistent tenets and tropes, which were disseminated internationally in multiple texts and genres; and it even had its own printing press.<sup>192</sup> Superficially, though, her Sufism appears to have more in common with the kinds of anti-institutional “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR) attitudes and non-

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189. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 66, File 4, typescript, 6 July 1996. Materials from the P.K. Page fonds are quoted here with the permission of Page’s literary executor, Zailig Pollock.

190. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 66, File 4, typescript, 24 August 1996.

191. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 66, File 4, typescript, 3 July 1996. See also Page’s similarly phrased denial of “a belief system” and “artifacts and creeds and dogmas” in *Still Waters*.

theistic religious movements that began to take hold of North America in the 1960s and 1970s. And yet, as I will argue here, her Sufism was not “emotionalism at best, indoctrination at worst” so much as a distinct form of personal religion grounded in specific religious, intellectual, and socio-cultural contexts. Like James, Page differentiates between personal and “institutional branch[es]” of religion (*Varieties* 29), with her preference for the former expressed variously, both through her autobiographical writings and through her adoption of a belief system that deliberately eschewed institutional ties.

While E.J. Pratt found comfort and artistic inspiration in a syncretistic blend of Christianity and spiritualism, Margaret Avison in evangelical Christianity’s discourse of a personal God, and Louis Dudek in an adaptive atomist philosophy, Page chose a fourth path in her search for religious fulfillment. This quest, which Sandra Djwa discusses at length in her biography, *Journey with No Maps: A Life of P.K. Page* (2012), led a middle-aged Page through Carl Jung and Subud spirituality to her discovery, in the 1960s, of a literal “Fourth Way,” a fusion of mystical traditions espoused by the influential Armenian-born mystic G.I. Gurdjieff and his former student, P.D. Ouspensky.<sup>193</sup> As Djwa summarizes, “Ouspensky posited three traditional ways of development: the Fakir (the Sufi tradition), the way of the Yogi (Hindi and Sikh traditions), and the way of the Monk (Christian and Buddhist traditions). Gurdjieff, by combining all three approaches, had evolved a Fourth Way” (193). Nevertheless, for Page, this Fourth Way was embodied

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192. Octagon Press, which was based out of London, went out of business in 2014. The Sufi texts on which Page relied continue to be published by the Idries Shah Foundation, which has operated as a registered charity in the United Kingdom since 2013.

193. Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and Subud are all discussed at length in *Mexican Journal*, as well as in Steffler’s introduction to *Mexican Journal* and Djwa’s *Journey with No Maps*.

most compellingly in the esoteric and perennialist Sufism of Idries Shah.<sup>194</sup> In the early 1960s, while she was living in Mexico with her husband Arthur Irwin, a Canadian ambassador who was formerly commissioner of the National Film Board and managing editor of *Maclean's*, she had been introduced to Shah's writings by Stella Kent.<sup>195</sup> Shah's particular brand of Sufism was "esoteric" chiefly because of its insistence, inherited from Gurdjieff and others, that "divinity is a matter of personal experience" (Shah, "Our Master" 120).<sup>196</sup> It was also esoteric by virtue of its claims to secret knowledge,<sup>197</sup> and "perennialist" in the related sense that Shah locates it outside of, and prior to, Islam in any of its institutionalized ("exoteric") forms. As Robert Graves asserts in his introduction to Shah's seminal text *The Sufis* (1964), "the Sufis are at home in all religion," since they are "bound by no religious dogma" (ix). Similarly, the American novelist Doris Lessing, with whom Page was friends, remarked in her review of Shah's

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194. Page recognized that Sufism existed in many forms. In an unpublished email to Djwa dated 2 July 2003, for example, she points out that "there are as many kinds of Sufism as there are kinds of Christianity" (Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 89, File 3, typescript, 2 July 2003). Nevertheless, she also told Djwa that her own form of Sufism derived from Shah's: "I don't know how to explain this to you. Which Sufism? The only Sufism that has had any effect upon me is by Shah" (Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 89, File 3, typescript, 3[?] July 2003).

195. Djwa writes: "It was about this time [April of 1963?] that Stella Kent shared with Pat a series of notes written by Idries Shah, an Afghan living in London who wrote on Sufi subjects and was beginning to be described as a new prophet of the Fourth Way. Shah was writing a book and had shared the first chapters with Stella" (*Journey* 195). The book Djwa alludes to here is Shah's *The Sufis*. See also Steffler ("Introduction" 16).

196. See, for example, Djwa (*Journey* 183). One should note, however, that teachings about "the work on one's self" (qtd. in Djwa 183) not only antedate Gurdjieff, but also inform many personal religions, SBNR movements, and New Age religions of the second half of the twentieth century.

197. See, for example, Shah's preface to *The Sufis*, where he refers to Sufis as the keepers of a "secret doctrine" or "secret tradition" that "cannot be appreciated beyond a certain point except within the real teaching situation, which requires the physical presence of a Sufi teacher," and which "is not available on the basis of assumptions which belong to another world, the world of intellect" (xxiii).

*The Commanding Self* (1994) that his Sufism “antedates Islam; claims to be the inner part or essence of every religion, is not interested in labels or definitions, and is continually reappearing, openly or in a disguised form, in every culture” (4).

In both of these respects, Shah’s esoteric and perennialist Sufism appears to exemplify James’s notion of personal religion. Indeed, James is frequently cited as one of the thinkers most closely associated with the perennial philosophy, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is predicated on an arbitrarily imposed distinction between esoteric and exoteric religion. Like Shah’s Sufi teachings, which follow *Varieties* in their preference for the former,<sup>198</sup> Page’s Sufi-inflected poetry resonates with multiple religious traditions. In fact, her verse affords critics the opportunity to see elements of the personal religions of Pratt, Avison, and Dudek refracted through her own syncretistic poetics; her writing reframes many of the concerns already explored in this study through its articulation of a complex belief system comparable to what Susan Rowland terms “Lessing’s multi-faceted Sufism” (167).<sup>199</sup> For example, as we will see in the first section of this chapter, Avison’s narrativization of her conversion to Christianity in 1963 provides a context for discussions of Page’s narrativization of her discovery of Sufism in the same year; as we will see in the second section, Pratt’s Jamesian distinction between the heart and the head and his concomitant acknowledgement of the necessity of over-

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198. There are strong echoes of James in Shah’s preface to *The Sufis* (xxiv), for example, and in a later chapter, Shah again follows James in trying to establish Sufism as “an inner teaching beyond formalized religion” (“Elephant” 44). See also Lessing’s review of Shah’s *The Commanding Self*, where she seems to be channeling James’s discourse of personal religion: she writes, “Shah has said often that a main difficulty in teaching is to prevent the material from being made into a system, yet another rigid framework of ideas, or a cult. This will happen in due course: it always does. Meanwhile here is the real thing, alive and full of juice and energy” (4).



beliefs prefigures Page’s psycho-spiritual distinction between the right brain and left brain; and as we will see at various points, Dudek’s attempts to reconcile scientific and religious perspectives—which his long poems characterize as a kind of never-ending voyage or ongoing experiment—mirror Page’s roughly contemporary embrace of Sufism for its scientific as well as its religious insights, and for its emphasis on the provisional and processual nature of belief.

Unless otherwise noted, the “Sufism” to which I will be referring is the perennialist form popularized by Idries Shah. However, it should be noted that I do so not to lend credence to Shah’s pretensions to authority, or to enter into longstanding debates about the merit of his teachings and their relation to Islam. Shah has already been scrutinized and his teachings routinely discredited by scholars such as L.P. Elwell-Sutton—who, in 1975, decried Shah and his ilk as “pseudo-Sufis [who] have scrambled on to the band-wagon of ‘Oriental’ mysticism set rolling by the Zen Buddhists in the 1950s” (12)—or Annemarie Schimmel, whose *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* does away with Shah simply by ignoring him and those “modern Western writers” who refuse to characterize Sufis exclusively as mystics who have “always remained inside the fold of Islam” (14, 17). Of course, Shah’s popularized Western Sufism, which claims to be neither distinctly Eastern or Western in character,<sup>200</sup> is not to be confused with what such scholars usually call “traditional” Sufism—although, as Müge Galin suggests in his study of Lessing, so-called traditional Sufism is itself a construction that belies the plural, adaptive, and occasionally contentious nature of Sufi thought in relation to Islam in its

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199. Although a comparative study of Lessing and Page would likely yield many new insights into the influence of Lessing’s Sufi ideas on Page’s writing, for reasons of time and space, this chapter will not be dealing with such connections.

200. See, for example, Shah (“Author’s Preface” xxv).

exoteric manifestations (xviii). Even Elwell-Sutton's take-down of "neo-mystics" such as Shah contends that the early Sufis introduced ideas that were originally "alien to orthodox Islam" and were only retrospectively validated when "Doctrinal support for these beliefs was found in the *Qur'an*" (10). Schimmel also acknowledges Sufism's syncretistic, cross-cultural potential when she notes that, "Since Islam grew out of a soil in which ancient oriental, Neoplatonic, and Christian influences were strong, a number of secondary influences may have worked upon Islam even in its earliest phase" (10). Furthermore, Page was aware that such scholars would not recognize her as a Sufi, and she was careful not to claim such a title for herself.<sup>201</sup> She, too, was often wary of Shah. Early on in *Mexican Journal*, she registers her agreement with her close friend Leonora Carrington, the renowned Surrealist artist, "that if he is not a real teacher, nothing matters. If he is, nothing matters" (259). My focus here is therefore less on Shah's persona than on the forms of Sufism disseminated in the writings of Shah and others in his circle, since these provided Page with the ideas and the language that would transform her poetry from the 1960s through to her death in 2010. Whatever Shah's current status in the academy, this chapter will demonstrate that Page's poetry, at least, frequently bears the markings of what Elwell-Sutton calls "authentic Sufi poetry": it is marked by her ongoing attempts to achieve inner clarity of vision and personal enlightenment, but also by traditional Sufism's "fundamental characteristics of self-denial, rejection of the world and its temptations, abandonment of self-love for love of God, yearning for union with and annihilation in God" (11).

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201. See, for example, Djwa (*Journey* 215) or Page's unpublished write-up on "Sufism" (Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 69, File 4, typescript, undated). In this chapter, I will be referring to "Page's Sufism" partially for ease of

Page's poetry has been the subject of many critical studies, and it earned her many of the nation's top literary accolades. As noted in my introduction, in 2009 Kevin McNeilly even went so far as to say that Page was "probably English Canada's most important poet of the last fifty years" (423). Despite this reputation, however, not all of her critics seem to be aware of the extent to which her Sufi beliefs structure the forms and content of her verse. Of course, some notable exceptions do exist: critics such as Constance Rooke, Vivian Vavassis, Zailig Pollock, Margaret Steffler, and Laura Cameron have all commented in some way on the religious dimensions of Page's poetry. But even Djwa, whose biography constitutes the most comprehensive analysis of Page's Sufism and its impact on her writing, effectively downplays Sufism's importance by "see[ing] Page's Sufism as being layered over her earlier readings in Jung" (231). Djwa's tendency to interpret Page's Sufism in terms of Jungian psychology seems to stem from her discomfort with Shah; she does not overtly follow Elwell-Sutton in grouping Shah among "a lunatic fringe of charlatans and impostors" (9), but she does imply that Page was naïve, at best, and foolishly misguided, at worst, in her approach to Sufism: she accuses Page of "ignoring – at least [in the late 1960s] – that the charismatic Shah had some questionable qualities and that his views on Sufism were ignored or rejected by many Sufi scholars" (220). Not unreasonably, Djwa questions Page's continued devotion to Shah's organization, if not to Shah himself, which seems inexplicable not only in light of his extravagant claims for Sufism but also his personal treatment of Page.<sup>202</sup> Still,

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reference and partially to acknowledge the profound effects of her sustained engagement with Shah's Sufism on her poetry.

202. For critical discussions of Shah's extravagant claims for Sufism, see Djwa (*Journey* 218). Djwa also supplies several striking examples of Shah's indifference and his harsh rejection of Page's remarkable, Sufi-inspired poetry in *Hologram* (see, for example, 236 and 277).

Djwa's comments are misleading: as we have already seen, Page's *Mexican Journal* evinces her early concerns about Shah, and there is no indication that Page ever conflated his distinctly perennialist Sufism with traditional Islamic forms—which is something that Steffler appears to do when introducing Shah as “a proponent of the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism” (“Introduction” 16). Compared to Djwa, Pollock, one of the other leading Page critics, is more sympathetic to Page's Sufism, although thus far his commentary on the subject has been confined to shorter studies, such as the essay “A.M. Klein and Kabbalah,” where he discusses Page's “profoundly religious sensibility” (143), or his introduction to Page's *Kaleidoscope: Selected Poems* (2010), where he maintains that many of the visionary poems from “Cry Ararat!” (1967) onwards “would be inconceivable without the stillness of spirit which Sufism enabled her to achieve” (16). More typically, Page's critics have been content to vaguely mark what Lucy Bashford and Jay Ruzesky identify as “a mystical element” or “a visionary quality” in her work (Page, “Entranced” 122): that is, even those critics like Barbara Colebrook Peace and Kelly Parsons, who place Page “among the twentieth century's great visionary poets” (37), do not often provide in-depth or rigorous analyses of what it actually means, aesthetically or religiously speaking, to be a visionary poet.

In what follows, I will address Page's Sufism directly, contextualizing her discovery of Shah and the subsequent maturation of her Sufi-inflected poetics with occasional reference to the forms of pluralism highlighted in James's writing and increasingly evident in Canadian religion and culture from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Without getting mired in religious and social history, I should observe, for example, that Reginald Bibby's ground-breaking surveys of Canadian religion, which

were conducted throughout the 1970s and 1980s, yielded much data about “the diversification of available beliefs and practices” (125); he concluded that “Canada’s dominant religious groups have taken a pluralistic view of religious belief and practice, leaving much up to the individual” (126).<sup>203</sup> To be sure, such pluralistic attitudes were not necessarily proportionately reflected in Canadian poetry, and the unorthodox beliefs of people like Page continue to be “ignored as embarrassments” (Luckhurst 431)—or, worse yet, to be acknowledged merely to be dismissed in pathological terms. Regarding the modernist scene as a whole, Roger Luckhurst explains that, “While there has been an explosion of interest in rethinking the relation of modernism and the occult, these treatments have often resorted to theories of compensation. That is to say, eccentric beliefs are seen as the result of secularizing pressure distorting traditional faith into improbable shapes” (431). This kind of logic certainly figures into Elwell-Sutton’s treatment of Shah’s Sufism: he accounts for the popularity of neo-mystical movements by arguing that “They appeal to the psychological weaknesses of bewildered individuals in a puzzling world” (12). If Elwell-Sutton’s assessment is accurate, then such “psychological weaknesses” were pandemic in Western culture in the second half of the twentieth century, when new and unorthodox forms of religious expression flourished alongside critically sanctioned “traditional” or “authentic” forms.

For this reason, the kind of pluralistic framework explored by James, or, more recently, by the philosopher of religion John Hick, seems to me much more in line with

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203. Although Bibby’s commentary largely refers to Christian traditions in Canada, the figures Brian Clarke cites from the 1961 Census speaks more generally to the “growing diversity of the Canadian population”: “By 1961,” he writes, “Protestants of British and Irish ancestry comprised only 35 per cent of the population; Catholics of French descent made up another 30 per cent; and the remaining 35 per cent belonged to neither of these two ‘old stock’ groups” (358).

Page's Sufi poetry—not to mention much more congruent with New Modernist Studies and its call for a more expansive understanding of modernism in its multiple modalities, as valid if occasionally conflicting narratives of cultural expression that might otherwise be excluded or pushed to the periphery of a monolithic modernity. There are significant parallels between this literary-critical shift to a more pluralistic approach to modernism and what Hick has described as the shift from religious “exclusivism,” wherein salvation is thought to belong “exclusively to one particular tradition” (31), to “pluralism,” wherein there are “a plurality of ways of salvation or liberation” (34). Just as the disestablishment of Christianity has gradually cleared space for more pluralist religious worldviews both within Christian churches and in society more generally, literary-critical understandings of high modernism as modernism have gradually given way to paradigms acknowledging alternative—and not necessarily coterminous—literary responses to modernity. While it is not my intention to retrospectively read Page's poetry as a representative catalyst for this shift in religion or literature, I would suggest that an in-depth analysis of her Sufi philosophy invites further consideration of the ways that pluralism variously informed, and responded to, religious and literary forms of expression in the twentieth century.

Indeed, Page is perhaps the most Jamesian of the four poets in this study, insofar as her writing constructs a personal religion committed both to the intersections of psychology and religious experience and to a multi-faceted, all-encompassing pluralism. In the first section, I will examine Page's narrativization of her Sufi “conversion” and the implications of what (following James) one might call her metaphysically pluralist interpretation of Sufism—that is, her insistence on the provisional or indeterminate nature of her beliefs; in the second, I delve into the experientially pluralist dimensions of her

Sufism by showing how her poetry dramatizes what Susan Dieleman, summarizing James, refers to as “the impossibility of capturing a ‘whole scene’ from just one perspective” (285); and in the third, I turn to Page’s Sufism as a form of esoteric mysticism which struggles to come to terms with its indeterminacy (metaphysical pluralism) and its limited perspectives (experiential pluralism) in order to communicate beyond the self. As Pollock asserts, Page’s Sufism—which gifts her with a third-eye or “‘Triclopian view’ of the world” (“Introduction” 10)—allowed her to successfully resolve some of the tensions of her early poetry identified by Brian Trehearne and Dean Irvine (9-10); however, it is my contention that her writing from *Cry Ararat!* onwards is still very much a record of unresolved, though not necessarily enervating, tensions. Her poetry’s creative rendering of Shah’s Sufism, which can be read as Page’s attempt to transcend the limitations of a “one-eyed” poetics (*Hand Luggage* 64, 86), simultaneously reinscribes aspects of perennialist, mystical, and esoteric discourse which are themselves fraught with unresolved aesthetic and religion tensions.

## **5.2 IFFY SUFISM: PAGE’S METAPHYSICAL PLURALISM AS “A CAPACITY FOR WHAT-IFFING”**

“A curious concept – *afterwards*  
bearing the phantom of *before* within it.  
Old-fashioned novelists fell back  
on *afterwards*  
to conjure up the sexual act  
or when referring to religious conversion:  
‘afterwards her life was entirely changed.’

A shadowy comparison always implicit.”  
(Page, “Alphabetical” 125; emphasis in  
original)

“What was that molecular dance, that bright augury?”

Mimi's life changed. After that, everything was different. She actually *knew* something. Sometimes. Like alternating current she remembers, then she doesn't."  
(Page, "Marathon and Life after Death" 24; emphasis in original)

Following Page's discovery of Sufism in 1963, her writing occasionally registers her desire to narrativize the event as a definitive, punctiliar conversion. In the first epigraph just quoted, Page proves she was keenly aware that what James calls the model of "instantaneous conversion" (*Varieties* 227) was a defining if sometimes unconvincing feature of the conversion genre. But, like Avison, her own conversion involved multiple stepping stones both before and after her immersion in Shah's teachings: long before her conversion, Page's parents predisposed her to believe in such things as reincarnation, clairvoyance, and supernatural phenomena (Djwa 28, 30; Rogers 16); as a fourteen-year-old, Page and her mother saw a "creature" with "enormous, expressionless dark eyes" in the window of her neighbour's home, a terrifying experience that also "made her receptive to the supranormal" (Djwa 28); shortly after the death of a close girlfriend nine years later, the friend appeared to Page and spoke with her, confirming her belief "that we were immortal" (qtd. in Djwa 60);<sup>204</sup> and in the decades after her first encounter with Shah's writings, her voracious reading further cemented and transformed some of these pre-existing beliefs. Naturally, many of these formative religious experiences filtered into her autobiographical writings, including her journal entries, poems, essays, and short stories. In the second epigraph listed above, for example, "Mimi" serves as a thinly veiled cipher for Page, and Mimi's fictionalized tale of how her recently departed friend has returned from the dead obviously borrows heavily from the author's own experience not only in terms of the story's basic narrative contours, but also in terms of specific details:

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204. Other accounts of this experience appear in *Mexican Journal* (236) and *Hand Luggage* (14).



in both cases, the spectral vision is memorably likened to a “molecular dance” (“Marathon” 24; qtd. in Djwa 60).

What is most significant for my purposes here, however, is the extent to which Page’s uncertainty—that is, her metaphysical pluralism—manifests in such autobiographical narratives of “conversion” or spiritual transformation, undercutting the certitude projected by other visionary writings, such as the oneiric “Another Space” (first published in *Poetry* magazine in 1969), where the persona’s self-doubts (“do I dream it? [5]) give way to confidence in the final lines: “now a new / direction opens like an eye” (61-62). Readers of James’s *Varieties* might reasonably conclude that the rhetoric of newness found in this poem—a rhetoric that, as we saw in our discussions of Pratt and Avison, also subtends modernist metanarratives of religious as well as aesthetic transformation—is largely performative. Yet the possibility that some of Page’s rhetoric of renewal was meant to serve a performative function does not preclude the fact that very real changes also occurred once she began to delve into Sufism. And these changes deeply affected her poetry: many critics would likely agree with Pollock—as I do—that her turn to Sufism in Mexico is “the pivot around which Page’s career turns” (“Introduction” 9). In this section, then, I will briefly summarize a few salient aspects of Page’s discovery of Sufism and her retrospective narration of that discovery before touching on how this project of religious self-fashioning, which draws heavily on the tropes of self-surrender and over-belief so prevalent in *Varieties*, connects to several other aspects of her metaphysically pluralist personal religion. Page’s resistance to institutional forms of religion, for instance, is predicated on a metaphysically pluralist approach to religion inherited from James, from anti-dogmatic perennialists such as

Aldous Huxley, and from neo-mystics such as Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, and Shah.

Just as Avison's religious breakthrough was preceded by a prolonged "grey period" (Avison, "A Religious Experience" 8) and her reading of texts such as James's *Varieties*, Page's own breakthrough was preceded by a prolonged period of desperation, introspection, and study. During this existential crisis, Page worked her way through an impressive array of texts on religion and psychology alongside friends such as Kent and Carrington. Much later, she would observe, "I've always quested, that's been my life's preoccupation . . . I've always felt there's a higher power and I had no idea what it was" ("Working in a Golden Age"). Nevertheless, Page's reflections from this period seem to stem less from her certainties about "a higher power" than they do from her sense that she "had no idea what it was." But both her *Mexican Journal* and her later autobiographical writings seem to agree about the urgency of her quest during these years. Still, in line with the constructivist explanation of religious experience discussed in previous chapters, I would readily echo Steffler's argument that, regarding Page's apparent conversion, she "played a much more active role than she perhaps admits or remembers, and that the force ascribed to Mexico is intensified and augmented by Page's receptivity to its pull" ("P.K. Page's 'Religious' Homecoming" 41). In other words, Page's expectations about religious experiences mediated and made possible her own experience; naturally, she interpreted her transformation in light of the texts she had read to help bring about that transformation.

As she recalls in *Hand Luggage: A Memoir in Verse* (2006), "I read, as if driven. Teilhard de Chardin, / Ouspensky and Hammar skjöld, Huxley and James, / *The Cloud of Unknowing* —the list could go on" (82). In a footnote, she explains that she is referring

here to “William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*” (82). Crucially, this text—and the others named or alluded to in this passage—is what Page alleges she was reading just before her “first introduction to Shah” (82). When cataloguing Page’s readings, however, Pollock does not mention James—nor do Djwa or Steffler. To my knowledge, this reference to James seems to have escaped the notice of Page’s critics entirely, but not without reason: in “Questions and Images” and *Mexican Journal*, even Page omits him from her extensive reading lists. Regardless of James’s actual significance to Page, though, her claim to have read *Varieties* in the early 1960s casts doubt on Pollock’s assertion that “it is doubtful whether she had even heard of Sufism before reading Shah” (“A.M. Klein” 143), since the central chapter of *Varieties*, on “Mysticism,” refers both to the extremely influential Islamic Sufi Al-Ghazali (402-05) and the lesser-known Gulshan-i Raz (420). And if Page did not encounter Sufism in James, she certainly would have been introduced to it as she zealously read and re-read Jung and Huxley, since both of them mention Sufism in texts with which Page was intimately acquainted.<sup>205</sup>

In Page’s conversion narratives—by which I mean the poetry and prose in which she recounts her gradual exposure to and eventual acceptance of Sufi ideas—she also moves from despair to self-surrender in a manner suggestive not only of James’s “sick souls” (*Varieties* 135), but also of the concept of over-belief. Page’s *Mexico Journal* is full of references to her prolonged state of spiritual depression in the lead-up to her discovery of Shah. At multiple points and in multiple ways, she confesses, “my emotional

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205. For references to Page’s interest in Jung, see Djwa (*Journey* 180-81) and Page (“Fried Eggs” 152). As Djwa notes, Page owned a “copy of Jung’s *Symbols of Transformation*, dated Mexico 1962” (*Journey* 183)—and Jung’s book mentions Islamic Sufism (193). But Djwa supplies even more evidence that Page would have encountered Sufism before reading Shah: Djwa tells us that while Page was doing research for the

centre is dead” (198), or “I feel I have never been more fogged in” (195), or again, “Have been going through one of the blackest periods of my life” (236). Like one of James’s case studies, the Page narrated here is ripe for religious conversion, with her over-belief or willingness to submit emotionally and intellectually as the primary prerequisite for her transformation. This process is also dramatized in poems such as “Cry Ararat!”, where her personal plight—whose religious significance is connoted by vaguely biblical allusions to “the Word” (105), “the I-am animal” (105), and features from the Book of Genesis’s story of Noah’s Ark, such as the white dove with “a green twig in her beak” (107) or the titular Mount Ararat—is generalized to describe how “the dreams that haunt us” and the symbolic “grey weather” of our own “terrible night” of the soul<sup>206</sup> can augur a turning point, if only we accept the poet’s invitation to admit defeat and call out for help: “O, then cry Ararat!” (107). Of course, this kind of self-surrender factors into multiple philosophies of religion, including Shah’s,<sup>207</sup> but in *Varieties* this concept—whether as “surrender” or “over-belief”—receives extensive and special treatment as an essential element of conversion and its narrativization, as I have already discussed with

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National Film Board at the French Embassy in Ottawa in the late 1940s, “she discovered Dom Robert, a Benedictine monk influenced by Sufism” (117).

206. “The dark night of the soul” is a phrase used both by Schimmel in her study of Islamic mysticism, and by Page in *Hand Luggage* (81). Page’s *Mexican Journal*, which often reads as the literary equivalent of a tenebrist self-portrait, also opens with the striking line, “Black, black, black is the colour of a Mexican night” (23). Steffler’s introduction to *Mexican Journal* offers a very good overview of Page’s aesthetic rendering of Mexico in these terms in relation to her ongoing journey of spiritual struggle and self-discovery.

207. Graves’s introduction to *The Sufis* suggests the necessity of over-beliefs to Shah’s Sufism (xxi), as does an Octagon Press pamphlet found in Page’s fonds at Library and Archives Canada, which advertises Shah’s *The Elephant in the Dark* (1974) and contains a blurb that foregrounds self-surrender as a link between Sufism and other religious traditions: “the conception of surrender to God” central in both Christianity and Islam is said to have “a counterpart in Sufi mystical tradition” (2006-0941, Volume 4, File 12, pamphlet, undated).

reference to Avison.

Similarly, although it is possible to interpret this moment and later poems featuring surrender and spiritual transformation in Jungian terms, as Djwa does quite convincingly, and although the textual record contains paltry evidence of Page's indebtedness to James, it is James who arguably supplies the framework within which the particulars of Page's capitulation most usefully come into focus as an event of personal as well as discursive or literary significance. On one hand, the degree of Page's despair, which can be measured against that of the "sick souls" in James, speaks to her personal readiness to discover the higher truths and "sense of purpose" she felt were "so sadly lacking in [her] life" in the early 1960s (*Mexican Journal* 244). Moreover, this discovery is possible only because of her over-belief. She turns to Sufism in an act of desperation and blind trust, not because she is entirely convinced by Shah on rational or intellectual grounds—hence her acceptance of Shah despite her concerns about his writing's "authoritarian tone" and "abstractions" (*Mexican Journal* 259). In this sense, her Sufism is metaphysically pluralist from the start, premised as it is on "abstractions" rather than fixed tenets, and on James's emphasis—passed down through Gurdjieff and countless other seekers in the twentieth century—on intuition and experience over intellectual or theological certainties. On the other hand, her writing's retrospective remediation of her spiritual surrender appears to have been an act of generic capitulation as well. That is, Page's conversion narratives, like Avison's, encompass a protracted period of self-discovery and bear many hallmarks of the conversion genre—including her pre-conversion surrender, her use of epiphanic discourse to mark her progress through

successive states of enlightenment,<sup>208</sup> and her post-conversion pronouncements that her senses have been heightened, so that she now tastes “flavours long-forgotten” and experiences “colours, sounds and movements one is usually incapable of seeing and hearing” (*Mexican Journal* 199, 203). At an even more fundamental level, Page’s most explicit statements of religious self-identification—for example, as “a religious non-Christian” (*Mexican Journal* 162), “a very religious non-Christian” (“That’s Me” 59), and “a very religious person” (*Still Waters*)—again suggest her position’s affinity with James’s notion of personal religion, both in their repudiation of institutional Christianity and in their metaphysically pluralist refusal to commit to any particular institution in lieu of Christianity.

Particularly in Page’s explicitly autobiographical writing, provisional over-belief is presented as a prerequisite not only for her acceptance of Sufism, but as an ongoing strategy or method of engagement with the world. In *Mexican Journal*, Page’s various readings reinforce her pre-existing metaphysically pluralist belief that openness, searching, and uncertainty are vital, since “truth” is an unstable concept: immersed in the mysticism-tinged novel *Riders in the Chariot* by the Nobel Prize-winning Australian author Patrick White, she muses that “Half the so-called ‘truths’ by which we lead our lives are not *proved*. All Einstein’s theories may one day appear mere primitive fumbling.

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208. Steffler has observed some of the ways in which Page retrospectively fashioned her narrative of spiritual discovery or enlightenment using words common in epiphanic discourse, such as “flash” (“P.K. Page’s ‘Religious’ Homecoming” 40; see, for example, Page’s “That’s Me” [59]). But Page also uses “flash” in the documentary film *Still Waters* (1990), where she reflects on the same epiphanic moment by saying, “I realized that really, I was a very religious person . . . I had this blinding flash.” What is more, “flash” was also an important word for Shah regarding “intuition,” as Djwa points out (*Journey* 368). It seems very plausible, given this evidence, that Page’s own narrative of spiritual discovery evolved as a result of her exposure to Sufi discourse and to the kinds

What about the whole theory of evolution? I am baffled by the flux. Of what is true one day being untrue the next” (185; emphasis in original). That Page acknowledges that our so-called “truths”—whether scientific or religious—are subject to “flux,” and that multiple truths may exist simultaneously or in quick succession, is evidence enough of her metaphysically pluralist predisposition. But if Page was inclined in this direction already, her exposure to Christopher Isherwood’s essay “Hypothesis and Belief” paradoxically clinched her belief in the necessity of over-beliefs or pro tem approaches to such grand concepts as “truth” or “God.” In a journal entry dated 14 July 1963, Page wrote, “Isherwood’s article ‘Hypothesis and Belief’ perfectly expresses my present point of view” (*Mexican Journal* 246). And Page does not seem to have been exaggerating. In October of the same year, when recording her personal thoughts about the Shah papers that Kent had shared with her, she re-uses the same language found in the final paragraph of Isherwood’s piece to describe her still-tentative relationship with Sufism “as an experiment” that she will dutifully “continue with” either until it yields results “or until the time set for the experiment is up—whichever occurs first” (259). The parallels between Isherwood’s concluding paragraph and this passage of Page’s journal are striking.

Still, these two authors were not alone in describing one’s choice of religion—in the larger context of the reality of religious pluralism—as an ongoing, scientific process: after briefly summarizing wave-particle duality as part of his own defence of pluralism, Hick writes, “Analogously, a religious tradition is a way of ‘experimenting’ in relation to the divine” (98). In *You Are Here*, this kind of experimental capacity for over-belief is

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of conversion narratives included in texts such as James’s *Varieties*, which frequently include references to blinding lights or “photisms” (252).

presented as an empowering, positive thing for Page's fictional double: "But she also knows this borderline, this area between belief and unbelief, a state that allows her to entertain ideas, or at least not to reject them. A capacity for what-iffing. It is something she was born with, like the colour of her eyes" ("Horoscope" 15). Mimi engages in "what-iffing" throughout *You Are Here*, as does Page throughout her poetry. Page's metaphysically pluralist approach to religion is everywhere evident, such as in the mystical dreamscape of "Another Space," where the persona admits, "I speculate / on some dimension I can barely guess" (30-31), or much later, in *Hand Luggage*, where she professes to have faith "in a god [she] cannot second-guess" (92) before falling back on the more familiar Jamesian discourse of indeterminacy: "I am out of my depth. What interests me most / is beyond me: the hologram, fractals and 'god'" (92).

Isherwood's "Hypothesis and Belief" appears to have resonated so strongly with Page because Isherwood, who followed the Vedic or yogic tradition subsumed into Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, grants his readers permission to have over-beliefs, to commit themselves to that which they have experienced or intuited but do not claim to understand. In fact, Isherwood suggests that conversion to any religion necessarily involves over-beliefs; one can only cross this threshold by suspending disbelief and accepting the target religion's beliefs on faith. As he explains, this threshold is "what Aldous Huxley has called 'the minimum working hypothesis'" (Isherwood 37). He then elaborates:

This word 'hypothesis' is extremely significant, but it will probably be overlooked by the outside observer, who prefers to simplify his picture of the world's religions by regarding their teaching as 'creeds' and 'dogmas.'



Nevertheless, a statement of religious doctrine can be properly called a creed only by those who know it to be true. It remains an hypothesis as long as you are not quite sure. Spiritual truth is, by definition, directly revealed and experienced: it cannot be known at second hand. (37)

Following James, then, Isherwood stresses the value of irrational belief and experiential religion or spirituality, in part to trouble materialist or scientific-materialist assumptions. However, according to Isherwood, if one's religious convictions are to last, there must be a point at which these hypotheses and experiments are embraced long-term, a point at which over-belief ("blind faith") transforms into the certainty on which religion depends: "Religion lives, and is revived, from age to age, because of the direct revelation of the few, the saints, who win for themselves a personal knowledge of spiritual reality. Religion survives *in spite* of blind faith, priestly persecution, ecclesiastical politics; in spite of superstition and ignorance amongst the masses of its adherents" (Isherwood 38; emphasis in original). Rather predictably, this division of religion into the "direct," personal religion "of the few" and the secondary, institutional religion of "the masses" faithfully duplicates the formula popularized by James.

Here, again, Page follows suit: despite her disavowal of organized religion, she does claim to have had direct knowledge of religious truths. However, like Isherwood, and like the mystics of James's *Varieties*, she claims this knowledge as a kind of sensuous intuition or direct personal experience that cannot be articulated, as if to protect it from being subjected to reason, the intellect, or the processes of institutionalization. In the National Film Board of Canada's documentary *Still Waters: The Poetry of P.K. Page* (1990), for instance, she describes how, in the very moment she realized she was "a very

religious person,” she

had some kind of a feeling for something . . . immaterial. I don’t know how to say it. I really don’t know how to say it. It was more a feeling than it was a concept. It was more—it wasn’t that intellectual. But I certainly had an awareness of the thing that other people called religion. I had some kind of a feeling for [it], but it took a different form. It was more related to experiences in nature, to experiences in love. It wasn’t related to artifacts and creeds and dogmas. (*Still Waters*)

Page’s metaphysically pluralist, what-iffing Sufism lays claim to genuine religious experiences, but her negative definition of those beliefs outside of and against the rubric of organized religion is a gesture seemingly intended to insulate her personal religion from the processes of institutionalization. Ironically, however, her repudiation of “the thing that other people called religion” and of “creeds and dogmas” (a distinct echo of Isherwood, above), which attempts to distinguish her Sufism from organized religion, is itself a key feature of the kind of creed repeated ad nauseam by countless theological modernists, theosophists, spiritualists, perennialists, and SBNR or New Age seekers in the twentieth century.

As the quotation from *Still Waters* reveals, Page’s aversion to the term “religion” marks a key tension in her thinking. Broadly speaking, this tension is also reflected in her poetry’s attempts to malign religion as monolithic and institutional, on one hand, and to selectively reclaim it as a force or essence that retains all of the functions and properties usually ascribed to religion while somehow resisting systematization or even definite articulation, on the other. The validity of religious experience itself is not in question here; instead, Page simply seems to be reinforcing James’s arbitrary distinction between

personal and institutional religion, a distinction which was further perpetuated in her own time by countless individuals and religious movements. As Craig Martin usefully explains,

What an individual takes to be “organized religion” as opposed to “true spirituality” will follow not from some objective features of things in the world but from the subject’s background assumptions. One might think that “organization” is the key, but it is not—there are several SBNR organizations. Rather, the word “organized” in “organized religion” is emptied of its usual content; what makes some instance of religion “organized” is not its features, but rather the fact that the subject making the identification does not like it. (184)

In light of this comment, it is perhaps most useful to view Page’s aversion to “religion” simply as a codified form of anti-institutional discourse common among, but not exclusive to, perennialists such as Shah, with significant cross-pollination between religious and literary circles. As we saw with Pratt and Avison, for example, even poets with institutional religious affiliations sometimes channeled literary modernism’s iconoclastic and anti-foundationalist rhetoric, if for no other reason than to steer religion away from legalism or other forms of perceived corruption.

In Page’s poetry, this anti-institutionalism manifests in several forms. In the 1944 anthology *Unit of Five*’s “Cullen” and *Ararat*’s “Christmas Eve—Market Square,” it underlies her anti-consumerist critique of Christmas, which intersects with mid-century interpretations of the Christian church as a business swayed by market pressures;<sup>209</sup> in

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209. In “Cullen,” commercial products and activities overshadow the story of the birth of Christ: “Christmas short-circuited and fired a tree / with lights and baubles; hid behind Christ; unseen / counted its presents on an adding-machine” (50-52). And in “Christmas Eve—Market Square,” the reappearance of “buyers” (6) and “baubles” (10) again hints at

“Generation,” which was published in Page’s debut collection from Ryerson Press, *As Ten, As Twenty* (1946), it marks an intergenerational gap between those in Canadian society for whom religion was a given and Page’s peer group, who were “treading / the treacherous tight-rope / of unbelieved religion” (8-10) while working to undermine old socio-political structures; in *The Metal and the Flower* (1954), Page’s anti-institutionalism resurfaces in a sneering remark about “Puppets in Rome / subject to Papal laws, discreet in tights” (“Puppets” 5-6); and in *Hand Luggage*, it colours her retrospective comparison of Canada and Australia, where her husband had taken up his first diplomatic post: “Christianity’d laid / its dead hand over both us, thus were we wed” (32).

In some cases, however, Page portrays religion in a much more positive light. In *Mexican Journal*, it is obvious that the stylized and sensory aspects of Roman Catholic ritual appeal to her aesthetic sensibility<sup>210</sup>—as does the Christian mysticism of Saint Teresa of Ávila, the sixteenth-century Carmelite nun who figures prominently in *Varieties*. Page lauds Saint Teresa’s approach to religion as a “union of a marvellously advanced kind” (236). This appreciation of the mystical dimension of organized religion—together with her well-documented openness to religious experimentation à la

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how materialistic this religious holiday—and Page’s own society—has become. However, Christianity and commercialism would later converge more positively in (sociological) narratives emphasizing the strength of the church. As Stolz et al. explain, “Since the 1980s in particular, representatives of the market theory have strongly questioned secularization theory” (18); that is, certain narratives of the church as a business competing in the free market (“the market theory” just mentioned) interpret this as evidence of the church’s strength and continuing ability to survive and innovate, not as a sign of its corruption or impending demise.

210. See, for example, *Mexican Journal* (212).

James, and her realization that syncretism shapes religious beliefs and practices<sup>211</sup>—further aligns Page with Hick: his pluralistic philosophy acknowledges that institutional religions “are not static entities but living movements; and they are not tightly homogeneous but have each become in the course of time internally highly various” (30). In other words, Page seems to share Hick’s conviction that “we might do well to speak of Buddhisms, Christianities, and so on, in the plural” (30), with her metaphysically pluralist acceptance of certain forms of Christian religious expression as valid avenues of spiritual enlightenment at least partially mitigating and nuancing her poetry’s apparent anti-institutionalism.

### **5.3 THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: EXPERIENTIAL PLURALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF “ONE-EYED” PERSPECTIVES**

“We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all.”  
(James, qtd. in Richardson 505)

“Where does sightedness lie? In the heart or the soul?  
Some say in the eye, but the eye, I suggest,  
is really no more than an optical tool.”  
(Page, *Hand Luggage* 55)

In addition to being metaphysically pluralist, Page’s Sufism and Sufi poetry is also experientially pluralist; that is, it acknowledges that no single perspective can accurately capture reality in the fullest sense of the word. Just as the epigraph from James, above, memorably captures the essence of this idea, Page’s dramatic production of the popular parable of “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” to be discussed below, serves as one of the best illustrations of her own experientially pluralist views. As I will demonstrate in this

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211. Page’s awareness that syncretism informs religious beliefs and practices is perhaps

section, these views are also prevalent in her post-1960s poetry, where her warnings against “one-eyed” perspectives (*Hand Luggage* 64, 86), or about the limitations of our senses more generally, collectively hearken back to James’s distinction between the head and the heart, aligning her not only with Shah’s Sufism, but also with many other mystical traditions in which reason and sensory perception are repeatedly subordinated to the subjective experiences and intuitions of the heart. However, while Pollock reasonably argues that Page’s Sufi poetry transcends the limitations of perspective through its embrace of a “‘Triclopian view’ of the world” (“Introduction” 10), I will suggest instead that the problems of perspective highlighted most poignantly in Page’s 1970s re-telling of the story of “The Blind Men and the Elephant” remain largely unresolved in her verse.

In “After Reading *Albino Pheasants*,” which Page wrote in response to a 1977 collection of poems by Patrick Lane, the problem of perspective is framed as a problem of intellectual conditioning:

Like cygnets hatched by ducks, our minds and flesh  
are imprinted early—what to me is light  
may be dark to one born under a sunny sky.  
And however cool the water my truth won’t wash  
without shrinking except in its own world  
which is one part matter, nine parts imagination.

I fear flesh which blocks imagination,  
the light of reason which constricts the world. (31-38)

The problems hinted at here, which we have seen in various forms in the poetry of Pratt,

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most evident in *Mexican Journal* (see, for example, 75, 123, 147, 163ff., and 214).

Avison, and Dudek, have to do with the ways that individuals are conditioned differently to experience and interpret the world (“our minds and flesh / are imprinted early”); however, Page tacitly affirms the kind of pluralism that this conditioning implies by presenting conflicting perspectives as distinct but equally valid examples of private “truth” (“what to me is light / may be dark to one born under a sunny sky”). The solution to this problem, apparently, is to ignore both “flesh” and “reason,” turning inward to a subjective truth which resists both through an act of the imagination, an act of artistic transformation that “could make a world / as unlike my own dense flesh / as the high-noon midsummer sky” (20-22). Indeed, the poem is as much a paean to the artistic as to the spiritual applications of “the irrepressible imagination” (16). Still, Page’s “fear” of “flesh which blocks imagination” (37) and her pejorative portrayal of reason as something “which constricts the world” (38) threaten to carry forward the binary opposition—between the head or the senses (namely, sight) and the heart—that is showcased in the critically acclaimed poem “After Rain.” Critics such as Trehearne and Irvine have read this latter poem as a textual enactment or instantiation of the much-discussed crisis or “impasse” in Page’s poetic career (Pollock, “Introduction” 9). According to Pollock, however, Page’s discovery of Sufism allowed her to retroactively work through such tensions between “sensual” and “rational” perspectives (“Introduction” 11), which are resolved through the addition of “a ‘third’ – the spiritual – which subsumes and fulfils them” (11). And yet in “After Reading *Albino Pheasants*,” at least, the central conflict of “After Rain” resurfaces and is resolved only insofar as it is referred—through the poem’s vaguely spiritual language of transformation and its experientially pluralist invocation of heterogeneous human perspectives—to her holistic

Sufi philosophy.

Although many of Page's critics have commented on the tensions between the heart and eye, between the senses and the appraising intellect, few have examined how she maps this tension onto her Sufi philosophy—particularly as it intersects with psychological theories of the divided brain. In the vein of Shah and the psychologist Robert Ornstein, who promoted Shah in the United States, Page's post-conversion writing localizes her earlier poetry's conflict between the head and the heart in the brain, lending this conflict—and her distinctly Sufi articulation of it—a scientific basis.<sup>212</sup> As Djwa implies, however, this conflict similarly involves a problem of perspective, since Shah and his devotees transformed their psychological findings about the brain into a metaphor for cultural difference: “The brain is divided into two hemispheres; the left hemisphere is directed towards the logical linear thinking associated with Western civilization, and the right hemisphere is directed towards intuitive, artistic, and holistic understanding” (Djwa 235). Two distinct ideas are being advanced here: one about the nature of the brain, and one about the putative nature of Western versus non-Western

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212. While Ornstein, an American psychologist and former professor at Stanford University, seems to have been Page's single most important reference for left- and right-brain research, she was also interested in the more academically suspect *Brain/Mind Bulletin: Frontiers of Research, Theory and Practice*. Multiple issues of this publication can be found in Page's fonds at Library and Archives Canada (MG 30 D-311, Volume 47, File 1, 1976-77). Incidentally, Page's encounter with Ornstein's *The Psychology of Consciousness* may have rekindled her interest in James. Gary T. Alexander indicates that “Ornstein, in his *The Psychology of Consciousness*, makes constant reference to James, with the result that the latter becomes at the very least a fellow traveler with the transpersonal position through his being used as a primary example of the correct attitude which researchers should take toward the phenomena of consciousness” (192). It is possible that Ornstein's preoccupation with James and his psychological approach to religious conversion may have tempted Page to retrospectively attribute significance to James while she was crafting her own conversion narrative in *Hand Luggage*.



cultures. Both feature in Page's poetry and prose.<sup>213</sup> Such essentializing East-West discourse implicates Page in the widespread and highly fraught Orientalism of her time, which circulated among modernist and late-modernist poets from Yeats to Ginsberg; that she professes a natural affinity with right-brain intuition, and that she routinely deploys Shah's Sufism as a form of anti-capitalist, anti-materialist critique, is further evidence of her complicity, however naïve or well-meaning, in a pervasive mid-century North American culture of appropriation, in which non-Western philosophical and religious traditions were exoticized, dehistoricized, and repackaged as what Donald S. Lopez Jr.—in his discussion of the parallel and contemporaneous Westernization of Tibetan Buddhism—calls “the cure for an ever-ailing Western civilization, a tonic to restore the spirit” (10).<sup>214</sup> Clearly, Shah's Sufism fulfilled this function for Page. But again, to return to my earlier point, it is also clear that her deployment of Shah's discourse of the divided brain, however problematic, confirms the experientially pluralist underpinnings of her own philosophy of religion, since she insists that left-brain thinking exists as a necessary complement to right-brain perspectives. In her unpublished Sufi study notes, for instance, she confesses, “so suspicious have I become of reason that I am inclined to swing to a belief in instinct—which, clearly, is no more reliable”;<sup>215</sup> and in *Hand Luggage*, she questions this ingrained preference, which has been with her since childhood: “What I'd

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213. Page's ideas about the brain appear in poems such as “Address at Simon Fraser” (203), and in miscellaneous other sources, such as: “Fairy Tales, Folk Tales: The Language of the Imagination” (57); her comments to Djwa about education (qtd. in Djwa, *Journey* 256); her interview with Christine Wiesenthal (27-28); and her autobiographical essay “A Writer's Life” (6).

214. In “Troping the Foreign in P.K. Page's ‘Quotations and Images,’” Hannah McGregor similarly discusses *Brazilian Journal* as a text which exhibits Page's complicity in “contributing to the fetishization and related depoliticization of ‘brazil’” (186).

215. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 141, File 8, binder.

*thought?* What I'd *felt*. For me feeling was thinking. / I thought with my heart—or so my heart thought” (10; emphasis in original). Page’s left- and right-brain rhetoric therefore seems to demonstrate not only the persistence of an internal conflict between her heart and eye—now translated into and extrapolated from the language of psychology—but also her ongoing post-conversion effort to reconcile this conflict by bringing together the apparently incommensurate discourses of Western science and Eastern religion.

Page’s 1970s re-telling of the ancient parable of “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” labelled “A Play for Puppets in Two Scenes” (63), underscores her indebtedness to Shah and James via its experientially pluralist and anti-institutional message.<sup>216</sup> Multiple religious traditions have their own version of this parable, with some predating the first extant Sufi version—written by Sanai of Ghazni in the twelfth century—by more than a millennium. A footnote in the published version of Page’s play indicates that she was working from the later “fable by the Persian poet Jalaludin Rumi (d. 1273)” (63). However, it seems likely that Page’s text was strongly influenced by Shah’s versions of the story, which were published in *The Sufis* (1964) and *The Dermis Probe* (1970). Like Shah’s initial, more classical rendition of the tale in *The Sufis*, Page’s play is about a group of blind men who know nothing about elephants but are given the rare opportunity to meet one. During this meeting, each touches only a single part of the elephant, and therefore each conceptualizes the elephant in a unique way: the man who touches the elephant’s leg believes that elephants are like pillars (66-67), for example, but the man who touches the tusk believes that elephants are like swords (67). For Page, the

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216. Under Page’s leadership, her Sufi study group also produced a second puppet play in 1981-1982, “Prince Attila’s Journey to the End of the World.” Like “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” this was an adaptation of an adaptation—this time drawing on the work of Idries Shah’s sister, Amina Shah (Djwa, *Journey* 247).

moral of the story emerges at the end, when the men begin to disagree because of their contradictory experiences of the elephant:

Now illuminated, the blind men no longer needed to beg. With such specialized knowledge they were qualified to establish a school of elephantology. . . . But how present to [the] world the arcane laws of elephantology to which they were privy – a pillar, a bed, a fan, a hose, a rope, a sword? They asked themselves. They asked each other. Chaos resulted.

Co-operation was impossible. They must separate.

To this day, if you want to learn about elephants you can enrol in one of the many schools: the Pillar, the Bed, the Fan, the Hose, the Rope, the Sword – although already the Hose has split into two schools, bitterly opposed to one another: the Hose and the Whip. (69-70)

Here, as in *Varieties*, intellectualizing limits the protagonists' capacity for spiritual understanding; as in "After Reading *Albino Pheasants*," the intellect "constricts the world" (38) instead of opening it to possibilities. The crystallization of "specialized knowledge" and the formation of sects "bitterly opposed to one another" are also highly reminiscent of James's warnings about the transition from personal to institutional religions. But in *The Sufis*, too, both Graves and Shah downplay the role of intellectuals (Graves xxii; Shah, "Author's Preface" xxiii; "Elephant" 40), a gesture which aligns them not only with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century experiential turn in psychology and theology (into which James's *Varieties* fit so naturally), but also, more immediately, with the rampant anti-intellectual and counter-cultural student movements that were sweeping North American universities in the 1960s and 1970s. Given these textual resonances and

contexts, the tale can easily be interpreted as a call for readers to reject religion in its most dogmatic and “specialized” forms, to find a perennialist Fourth Way that affirms the truth of personal religious perspectives but looks beyond to a greater, unifying truth. Like James in *A Pluralistic Universe*, Page’s text pointedly reminds us that “our natural experience, our strictly moralistic and prudential experience, may be only a fragment of real human experience” (James, *Pluralistic* 138). Considered in light of another context, that of the increasing “fragmentation of religion” in Canada (Bibby 86), this pluralistic message is a provocative one—yet it is a message that should be familiar to readers of Page’s poetry. Like the unnamed interlocutors of “Cosmologies,” we, too, are in danger of being “cut off from higher frequencies” (8); we are “blind inhabitants of a diving-bell” (11-12), with only our limited, conditioned subjectivities to mediate our varying interpretations of reality in its many forms.

In Shah’s version of “The Elephant in the Dark” story, in particular, the blind men are scholars as well as “outsiders” (43)—the implication being that he is an insider letting his readers in on a secret, that they now share with him a god’s-eye view of reality. But Page’s Sufi poetry, which evinces her “deliberate nurturing and development of a more permeable lens and open eye” (Steffler, “P.K. Page’s ‘Religious’ Homecoming” 52), also invites readers to reject the one-eyed perspectives of the blind men in favour of the transcendental view facilitated by the activation of “a third eye” (*Hand Luggage* 86). In “Kaleidoscope,” for example, the final stanza effectively presents the poem itself as an instrument for the realignment and reconciliation of seemingly disparate ways of seeing:

Nothing is what it seems.

Through this glass eye

each single thing is other—  
all-ways joined  
to every other thing.  
Familiar here is foreign  
fresh and fair  
as never-seen-before.  
And this kaleidoscope uniting all,  
this tube, this conduit optical,  
this lens  
is magic. Through it—see  
(who dares?)  
the perfect, all-inclusive metaphor. (60-73)

Like the symbol of the kaleidoscope it contains, the poem engenders the hope that the kinds of conflicting perspectives figured in the “The Blind Men and the Elephant” can, and will be, united; moreover, the defamiliarization process (“Familiar here is foreign / fresh and fair / as never-seen-before”) set into motion by a simple twist of the kaleidoscope is replicated in poems such as “Presences” and “Fly: On Webs,” which also hint at the promise of the “all-inclusive metaphor,” god’s-eye “map” (“Presences” 32), or “myriad-faceted eye” (“Fly: On Webs” 9) one needs to effect an imaginative reconstellation or merger of multiple subjectivities—including those contained within each of us.<sup>217</sup> Page is able to assume different identities and entertain different

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217. Page has written extensively about the multiplicity of the self: see, for example, “Alphabetical” (127), “Each Mortal Thing” (11-12), “Fairy Tales, Folk Tales” (56), “Looking” (12), “A Writer’s Life” (4), and “Name” (2-3). For a critical take on the subject, see also Douglas Freake’s “The Multiple Self in the Poetry of P.K. Page.”

perspectives on reality, but also to step outside of them into the “total I” of “Cry Ararat!” (107); and for the reader, such poems function to dramatize the kind of experiential pluralism that this multiplicity of perspectives suggests, whether or not one “dares” (“Kaleidoscope” 72) to direct one’s attention to the divine, transcendent, unifying reality that is so often a proverbial elephant in the tantalizingly unfilled spaces of Page’s poems. In fact, as Trehearne observes, Page’s “deep recognition of the I-ness of all perception” resolves many of the tensions that poems such as “Cry Ararat!” introduce only by virtue of its experientially pluralist nod to the fact that multiple perspectives “can coexist, not cancel each other” (*Montreal Forties* 104).

Yet it is Hick, perhaps, who provides the most useful summation of the kinds of problems of perspective that such a position entails—in part because he unwittingly highlights two of the texts that directly influenced what I will refer to as Page’s kaleidoscopic poetics.<sup>218</sup> Considering the ramifications of a pluralist approach to religion, Hick asks,

But how can such a view be arrived at? Are we not proposing a picture reminiscent of the ancient allegory of the blind men and the elephant . . . ?

Clearly, in the story the situation is being described from the point of view of someone who can observe both elephant and blind men. But where is the vantage-point from which one can observe both the divine Reality and the different limited human standpoints from which that reality is being variously perceived? The advocate of the pluralist understanding cannot pretend to any such cosmic vision.

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218. It seems likely that Page’s interest in kaleidoscopes (see, for example, “Another Space,” “Unless the Eye Catch Fire . . . ,” and “Kaleidoscope”) may have come from her study of *The Sufis*. In “The Elephant in the Dark,” Shah refers to the translation, adaptation, and dissemination of Sufi texts as a “kaleidoscopic process” (39).

How then does he profess to know that the situation is indeed as he depicts it? The answer is that he does not profess to *know* this, if by knowledge we mean infallible cognition. (37; emphasis in original)

Not only does Hick's reference to the "ancient allegory of the blind men and the elephant" again underscore the experientially pluralist dimensions of Page's poetry, but his subsequent description of how pluralists rely on "hypotheses" instead of "infallible cognition" (37) calls to mind Isherwood's "Hypothesis and Belief," which—like Shah's story of "The Elephant in the Dark"—had a profound impact on her writing. For Page, however, the problem is that, as a writer who wishes to communicate to others the pluralist essence of the story of the elephant, she needs to temporarily adopt a "cosmic vision" and project her hypothesis in the declarative mode.

Realistically, of course, Page shares more in common with the blind men of her story; her perspective has been similarly constrained by her conditioning. Examining Page's reflections on her own poetic process, one can see a tension between her oft-stated belief that her poetry comes to her directly, as if from a muse or through a form of divine revelation, and her poetry itself, which bears the distinct traces of her encounter with mystical discourse in general and Shah's idiosyncratic Sufism in particular. In an interview with Jon Pearce, Page shared that, "According to Robert Graves, there are two kinds of poets: the Muse poets and the Apollonian poets. The Muse poets are the ones that go into a kind of trance and are taken over, and the Apollonians, as I understand it, are the ones who manufacture poems" ("Fried Eggs" 149). Page then self-identifies as a Muse poet (149). Pearce gently challenges her, though, and she soon concedes, "Maybe I am a combination of both. Certainly, I work a great deal on certain poems; there's no

doubt about that.” (150). Indeed, Pearce seems to have nudged Page into fleshing out a contradiction in her narrative of herself as a passive instrument or Muse-inspired poet. And a much earlier comment by Page on artistic process points even more emphatically in the opposite (“Apollonian”) direction: as she complained in a 1941 letter to fellow poet Elizabeth Brewster, “The annoying part about poetry is that it really doesn’t depend on inspiration entirely as is so commonly believed – it’s a long hard grind to turn out a finished work, as I know only too well” (qtd. in Djwa 64). After her Sufi conversion, however, Page repeatedly discusses her creative work as a passive, revelatory affair, insisting in multiple poems and interviews that her poetic process does, in fact, “depend on inspiration entirely”: writing poetry is “like taking dictation” (“How to Write a Poem” 15); poetry enters her orbit “like a boomerang riding a magical arc and, continuing in its forward path, it will vanish unless intercepted” (“Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman” 211).<sup>219</sup> Yet Page’s critics have also repeated this romanticized narrative, reinforcing her vivid “impression of a guiding hand—as if I am hanging on to the opposite end of some giant pen which his moving masterfully and hugely in some absolute elsewhere” (“Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman” 211): Linda Rogers, for one, remarks that Page “continues to be, in accordance with Mother Theresa’s direction to all of us, ‘a pencil in the hand of God’” (20). But even in the case of a poem such as “The Disguises,” which Page cites as an example of a “whole poem that came straight from [a] dream” (“Fried Eggs” 151), the language is clearly steeped in mystical discourse, broadly speaking, and

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219. Page characterizes poets or artists as passive figures in her discussion of dream poems such as “Shaman” and “The Disguises” (“Fried Eggs” 150-151), but also in a variety of other texts and contexts: see, for example, “Questions and Images” (212-13), “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman” (208, 210-11), “The Hidden Room” (1-3), “In Class We Create Ourselves” (17-20), “Request to the Alchemist” (1-5), “This Heavy Craft” (1-11), “A Writer’s Life” (3), “Entranced” (123), and “How to Write a Poem” (13-15).



in the specific forms of esoteric and psycho-spiritual discourse imparted to her by Shah and Ornstein: Shah's influence is manifest in the poem's esotericism ("You were ambiguous and secret / and hidden in other faces" [5-6]); its suggestion that God (the poem's shape-shifting "Lord" [1]) is an "ineffable presence" (8)—hence the closing simile in place of a more confident metaphor (8-9); and especially in her later allusion to Shah and Ornstein's split-brain theory to supply scientific evidence of the correspondence between the acts of dreaming and writing the poem ("Fried Eggs" 151).

Despite her suggestions to the contrary, then, Page's religious experiences and self-fashioning as a Muse-inspired poet can be subjected to the kinds of discourse analysis that helped reveal the constructed nature of Avison's conversion narrative. As I have suggested above, Page's Sufi writings paradoxically highlight her indebtedness to and reliance on the very kinds of conditioning and religious forms that she claims to resist. In other words, the Muse narrative is largely an unconvincing one: while Page parrots Shah, maintaining that Sufism "does not dogmatize, condition, ritualize belief, or provide emotional stimulus" ("Sufism"),<sup>220</sup> her very repetition of such claims—using forms of perennialist and psycho-spiritual discourse characteristic of Shah's intellectual circle, no less—indicates the extent to which her Sufism had conditioned her thoughts and patterned their expression in her poetry. To be sure, Page's Muse narrative could also be explained through the lens of her friendship with Carrington and her resulting interest in the "creative automatism" of the (British) Surrealists, as Trehearne observes (*Montreal Forties* 57); or, more provocatively, one might even agree that "Her later wry references to abandonment by the Muse ("Why did you stop writing?" "I didn't. It stopped.") are .

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220. Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 69, File 4, typescript, undated.

. . . conscious or unconscious attempts to project these practical creative crises onto an external and more powerful agent” (Trehearne, *Montreal Forties* 103). Nevertheless, Page’s recurrent insistence on this kind of narrative in her poetry and prose from at least 1969 through 2009<sup>221</sup> suggests to me that this rhetoric is not simply part of a “wry” and possibly “unconscious” strategy of deflection, but is rather an integral aspect of an earnest, deliberate, and ongoing project of spiritual self-fashioning. Accordingly, it is worth making explicit the fact that some of Page’s earliest articulations of this narrative—for example, in the 1969 text “Questions and Images” (212-13) or the 1970 “Traveller, Conjuror, Journeyman” (208, 210-11)—coincide with the phase during which Sufism irrevocably assumed a place of primary importance in her life and writing, beginning to serve as the ultimate intellectual and religious framework for her art.

#### **5.4 MAKE IT NOUMENAL: SUFI MYSTICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE**

“Explain it? I can’t. But it’s true I’m in love  
 with some point beyond sight, with some singular star  
 for which words won’t suffice, which reduce it, in fact.  
 Head on it’s invisible, if I should look  
 with my cones, not my rods, it would vanish — expunged;  
 if I glance to the side, through my rods, then the star  
 shines as brightly as Venus. Which truth is *the* Truth?”  
 (Page, *Hand Luggage* 93; emphasis in original)

“(I know  
 nothing of what I speak  
 I speak  
 nothing of what I know)”  
 (Page, “The Yellow People in Metamorphosis” 95)

As James confidently proclaims in *Varieties*, “personal religious experience has its roots and centre in mystical states of consciousness” (379). Yet James also observes that most

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221. This date range assumes “Questions and Images” (1969) and “How to Write a

varieties of “mystical literature”—a genre with which much of Page’s post-conversion poetry inarguably intersects—“prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth” (420-21). As Schimmel similarly remarks, “To analyze the mystical experience itself is next to impossible since words can never plumb the depths of this experience. Even the finest psychological analysis is limited; words remain on the shore, as the Sufis would say” (7). And herein lies another fundamental problem for Page: her personal, mystical religious experiences form the basis of her Sufi beliefs, but they are ineffable—so that, as a poet who wishes to communicate her vision to others, she is left with the impossible task of finding a language commensurate with a higher truth “for which words won’t suffice, which reduce it, in fact” (*Hand Luggage* 93). This kind of ineffability is, as one may recall from our discussion of Pratt, the first of James’s “four marks” of mystical experience (*Varieties* 380). Still, as I argued in reference to Avison’s poetry and to the work of constructivists such as Wayne Proudfoot and Ann Taves, this discourse of ineffability is itself a trope which can be subjected to analysis, despite what Schimmel says. In the second epigraph to this chapter, however, Page’s invocation of this trope (“I know / nothing of what I speak” [95]) is modified by her esoteric admission that, even if she were able, she is not necessarily willing to communicate the knowledge she has gleaned from her encounters with the noumenal (“I speak / nothing of what I know” [95]). In these four lines, then, Page succinctly juxtaposes two of the contradictory imperatives underlying Shah’s Sufism: the necessity of guarding its “secret doctrine,” and the necessity of teaching others this special knowledge, though it “is not available on the basis of assumptions which belong to another world, the world of intellect” (Shah,

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Poem” (2009) as its provisional endpoints.

“Author’s Preface” xxiii). In what follows, I will examine this tension further, considering how Page’s poetry foregrounds both the esoteric and deeply personal nature of her Sufism and her simultaneous desire to move beyond ineffability to communicate her beliefs—even if, as James reminds us, “To redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances,” necessarily involves an act of alchemical transformation in which the silent mystic is forced “to speak, and to use general and abstract verbal formulas” (*Varieties* 432).

But when did such a transformation occur for Page? As a teaching story meant to communicate a message central to her Sufi belief system, “The Blind Men and the Elephant” suggests that, as far as Page’s prose is concerned, a shift seems to have occurred in the 1970s, which Djwa identifies as “the decade in which she spoke publicly of an inner journey that was to last the rest of her life” (222). Of course, Page had already publicly shared details about her spiritual transformation in the late 1960s, both in autobiographical prose pieces such as “Questions and Images” and, more obliquely, in poems such as “Cry Ararat!” But to the latter text’s question, “Must my most exquisite and private dream / remain unleavened?” (106), her subsequent Sufi-inflected verse would respond, time and again, with an emphatic “no.” While Page’s early poetry is replete with images of personal alienation and confinement, I would agree with Pollock—who cites as partial evidence such “socially and politically engaged” poems as “Address at Simon Fraser” (1991)—that her discovery of Sufism did not induce “an inner retreat from the world”: “If anything,” he submits, “the world is more present to her in her later years, for good or for ill, than it has ever been” (“Introduction” 17). As Peace and Parsons suggest with reference to the “spiritual ecology” of poems such as “Planet

Earth" (1993), this "is a poetry that serves the planet, that serves life" (39). Page's late poetry is no solitary affair, then, but rather a form of public activism emanating from a religious belief system whose "secret doctrine" remained buried but whose ecocritical consciousness and undisguised commitment to what Shah calls a "creed of love" (*The Sufis* 317) nevertheless produced publicly visible "fruits" (James, *Varieties* 326). While Elwell-Sutton had repudiated Shah's Sufism as a form of "Pseudo-Sufism" that was "centred not on God but on man" (16), it would be difficult to level such accusations against Page's Sufism as it is expressed in her late poetry.

That this outward shift in Page's poetry may be said to have religious roots should surprise no one, particularly given her open and repeated acknowledgement of Shah's teachings and their impact on her way of thinking. Djwa remarks that "Shah had apparently told Stella Kent if P.K. Page wanted to develop her interest in Sufism it was necessary for her to organize a group" (215), and in his introduction to *The Sufis*, Graves had issued an equally Jamesian challenge to translate one's private religious experiences into pragmatic, tangible results in the social sphere: he alleges that, "whereas Christian mystics regard ecstasy as a union with God, and therefore the height of religious attainment, Sufis admit its value only if the devotee can afterward return to the world and live in a manner consonant with his experience" (xvi). Like Pratt and Dudek, and to a lesser extent Avison, Page would struggle with the question of how her poetry could serve this pragmatic, communicative function while resisting the ineluctable forces of ritualization or institutionalization. However, unlike Dudek's "functional poetry," which he developed specifically as a means of sharing his personal philosophies, Page's comparatively clear-cut distinction between prose as "a medium for ideas" and poetry as

a medium that “really isn’t” intended for this purpose (“Fried Eggs” 154) threatened her ability to communicate what was already an inherently arcane belief system.

In *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies* (1981), several poems rely on inherited symbols to communicate Page’s belief that an ultimate reality exists prior to and beyond either the senses or language. This belief is one espoused by mystics of all stripes: after quoting the Sufi Al-Ghazzali at length, James asserts that the ineffability of transcendental religious experiences is “the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else” (*Varieties* 405). For Page, such truths exist “upstream of the senses” (*Mexican Journal* 248); like other mystics, she “emphatically den[ies] that the senses play any part in the very highest type of knowledge which their transports yield” (James, *Varieties* 406). In *Evening Dance*’s “Stefan,” for example, a young boy surprises a group of adults when he sees a baby and observes, “*When he thinks it must be pure thought / because he hasn’t any words yet*” (4-5; emphasis in original). However, the very notion of “pure thought” runs counter to the constructivists’ claims that all experiences are mediated, even prior to their articulation. Whether consciously or not, Page’s religious writing clearly takes its cues from internalized mystical discourses. In yet another poem from *Evening Dance*, “Chinese Boxes,” Page’s reliance on a series of inherited metaphors—such as those included in her concatenated list of “an all-ways turning eye— / a dot, an aleph” (7-8), or her appeal to an “inner eye” (32)—actually dramatizes the impossibility of accessing a pre-language or pre-sensory state. In her poetry, she is forever barred access from this “area behind the eyes / where silent, unrefractive whiteness lies” (“Stories of Snow” 50-51).<sup>222</sup> And the

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222. While this particular metaphor for the pre-linguistic state is striking and unique, Page would repeat it in different forms in poems such as “Now This Cold Man” (21-22)

“dot” of the eighth line resonates intertextually not only with Shah’s cryptic gloss of “dot,” or “point,” as a “concealed word” that signifies “deep meditation” (“a word for Sufism”) and arcane “inner knowledge” (*The Sufis* 372), but also with Page’s poem “Dot” (also from *Evening Dance*), where it is an allusion to the mystical Sufi order of the so-called Whirling Dervishes. The circular Sama dances of Rumi’s Dervishes or Mevlevi Order of Sufis are often accompanied by instrumental music, and are intended to cause the participants to “become transported in ecstatic flights” (Schimmel 326). In the densely allusive spiritual economy of Page’s poem, the dancers are “Spinning, a dot” (8); the symbolic dancer of the poem acts not as a centrifuge, but rather as a non-verbal locus in which the binaries of self/other, “afterward/before” (10), and “Visible/invisible” (13) are swallowed up into a unified and perfect whole—“A sphered sphere” (20).

Accordingly, in Page’s Sufi lexicon, these “dots” are also “vanishing points” symbolizing what Peace and Parsons call “the death of the self, ‘a spark, extinguished.’ Not physical death but what Rumi and other Sufis have spoken of as ‘fana’ or ‘self-annihilation,’ death of the false self, the ego-driven life, so that one can have union with the divine and eternal” (50). More importantly for my purposes, however, such vanishing points represent an extra-textual space, a transcendental escape from language that can only be approximated through crude metaphors and optical illusions. In the first stanza of “Chinese Boxes,” vanishing points are represented blatantly by the “dot,” and by the boxes of the title (“Box within box” [1], they are stacked recursively from “large to small diminishing” [3]), although they also appear frequently in other post-conversion poetry, in various forms, as figurative devices which compellingly reinscribe rather than resolve

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and “Unable to Hate or Love” (17), and she would even retroactively interpret it as a reworking of Rumi in “Looking” (18).

the metaphysical paradoxes inherited from Shah's Sufism.<sup>223</sup> As Shah explains, Chinese boxes are for him symbols of spiritual "evolution": "Most people will see in a series of Chinese boxes, one inside the other, only an excellent artistic or craftsmanlike achievement. The Sufi, having found the key to 'eternal succession' will realize that this produce is an analogy, not something to puzzle or delight the barbarian" (*The Sufis* 325).

In the light of such claims, the process of diminution dramatized in the first stanza of "Chinese Boxes" can be read as a species of Sufi self-annihilation, and its mirrored reversal in the second stanza (where the boxes grow "From small to large increasing" [18-19]) can be read as an illustration of how, once the individual has evolved spiritually, the dissolved and diminished self can comprehend the holy order underlying all things. This order informs reality's basic building "blocks" (20), which—when multiplied on a grand scale—become "too large and sheer / for sight to encompass" (26-27). That is, "the absolute" is contained in microcosm and macrocosm, though once more, it is a transcendental reality which is rendered "imperceptible to any sense" (31). And just as the nested Chinese boxes of Page's poem serve as an "analogy" of the process by which the initiated may continue along the path of "eternal succession" (Shah, *The Sufis* 325), the poem itself is constructed as if to encourage meditation on its form: it is divided perfectly in two, with each stanza containing seventeen lines; as already observed, the process of diminution in the first stanza is reversed in the second; each half begins with "Box within box" (1, 18); and each ends in a positive assertion of nothingness vaguely reminiscent of the Buddhist concept of Śūnyatā, or "emptiness." In the first of these assertions, the vanishing point which results from the process of diminution is posited as

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223. For other examples of vanishing points in Page's poetry, see, for example, "After Donne" (9-14), "The First Part" (72), "The Maze" (17, 20-21, 23-25, 27-31), and



a space “where, twinned with its answer, / question is born null” (16-17); the binaries introduced in the first half of the poem are therefore cancelled out by an ineffable, transcendental act that can be figured only indirectly, through verbs such as “spinning” and “conjured,” which are suggestive again of the mystical Sama, on the one hand, and magic, on the other. In the second stanza, the vanishing point is one that results from an infinite expansion, a plenitude that resembles “emptiness” (34) only because it exceeds and therefore confounds our limited human senses; “the absolute” can be glimpsed momentarily here, too, thanks to the “sightings of [an] inner eye” (32). As Pollock argues, this “inner eye” may have offered Page the “Triclopian” or third perspective that she required to address the aesthetic as well as spiritual tensions of her earlier verse (“Introduction” 10). However, in poems such as “Chinese Boxes,” one can see that Page attempts to resolve such tensions through recourse to Sufi symbols, which rely in turn on broader mystical discourses of ineffability.

What is more, the “absolute” reality discernible in “Chinese Boxes” is visible only briefly (thus once more calling to mind James’s “four marks” of mystical discourse, which include “transience” [*Varieties* 381]). Furthermore, it is discernible only because of the negative imprint that it leaves: it is an imperceptible architecture present in “the sky” (22), “visible as air / is visible when briefly smoked with breath” (24-25). As in the poetry of Avison and Dudek, this divine essence is available to us only fleetingly, in epiphanic glimpses. Of course, in Page’s poetry, this kind of epiphanic discourse functions as a natural extension of her mystical Sufi beliefs, which repeatedly encode the mystical trope of ineffability, and yet it also relates organically to her vision of the poet as a passive instrument of a higher power, as “a vehicle, a channel for something that

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“Infinite Regression” (38-39).

writes through me” (“A Writer’s Life” 3). As she elucidates, “I believe art has two functions: a lower and a higher. The lower is invaluable. It shows us ourselves – Picasso’s *Guernica*, for example. The higher – more valuable still, in my view – gives us glimpses of another order” (21-22). As this second function implies, Page’s Sufi poetics is framed in such a way as to counterbalance its necessarily “personal” aspects by pointing others (if only through the borrowed symbols and language of ineffability detailed above) towards what she intuits to be at the heart of “religion” in its purest, most pluralistic sense: not an anthropomorphic “God” (“How strange that we imagine a bearded man” [“Alphabetical” 126]), but rather an elephant that must remain in the dark, a kind of “divine *impersona*” (Hick 43; emphasis in original) whose existence can never be confirmed and whose true nature can be “glimpse[d]” but never fully articulated.

## **5.5 CONCLUSION**

In the crucible of Page’s Sufi-inspired poems, many of the binary oppositions identified by her critics—such as “personality and impersonality, interiority and exteriority, subjectivity and objectivity, multiplicity and wholeness” (Pollock, “Introduction” 9)—appear to be resolved in the sense that, referred to her Sufism, the aesthetic tensions of her early verse are no longer symptomatic of spiritual paralysis, but rather constituent ingredients of a newly formed pluralistic poetics. Beginning in *Cry Ararat!* and *Evening Dance of the Grey Flies*, but continuing in each of her subsequent collections, Page’s personal religious experiences translate into poetry that seeks to resist aestheticizing art-for-art’s-sake impulses and to trouble the sometimes one-eyed perspectives of her early writing. Still, the imported symbols and discourses of her post-1960s poetry also create

new tensions and paradoxes that spill out beyond the poems' textual frames. In closing, however, I would argue that, in Page's hands, these tensions are frequently not a bug, but a feature; as the title of "Questions and Images" insinuates, her Sufi poetry grapples with many questions (about art, religion, and countless other subjects), but more often than not, it answers with "images" rather than "answers"—with provocative symbols, figures, and allusions that collectively and deliberately refuse to resolve the realities of metaphysical and experiential pluralism that her writings repeatedly invoke.

Nevertheless, I have only begun to map out Page's perennialist, pluralist poetics; many questions remain unanswered here, too. What of the transnational dimensions of Page's Sufi poetry, for example, and to what extent did her travels in the 1950s shape her writing and beliefs? What of Shah's own border-crossings and their impact on his nascent philosophy? While Page discovered Sufism in Mexico, her art was also informed by her experiences of living abroad with Arthur in Australia and Brazil. Accordingly, and in consideration of Shah's provocative articulation of a perennialist Sufism which was said to predate all religions and thus transcend the binary opposition of Eastern and Western religion, I am interested in Page's Sufi poetry as proof of her writing's "translocatedness"—that is, as a representation of "the ways in which a particular poetics, or a broader aesthetic practice, can be informed by and responsive to both its own location and a larger transnational context" (Ballantyne, Dvořák, and Irvine 11). I have done this in the most cursory fashion by summarizing Page's readings and various life experiences from her time in Mexico, but much more can be said about the impact of her travels and eventual residence in Western Canada on her religious beliefs, or of Shah's own travels on his formation of a perennialist, syncretistic philosophy of religion.

As well, Page left a tremendous impression on multiple generations of Canadian poets. However, given the esoteric nature of her Sufism, and given that this particular form of belief was somewhat anomalous within Canada—let alone within Canadian literary circles—what can be said about the broader implications of her Sufism and its expression in her poetry? It may be worth remembering that in Canada, where Page would settle permanently after returning from Mexico in 1964, the arrival of a large number of non-European immigrants in the 1960s made it increasingly clear—if it were not clear already—that the religious make-up of the nation was shifting.<sup>224</sup> John Webster Grant describes how increased immigration in and leading up to the 1960s directly impacted diversity within the Christian (and especially Protestant) Church in Canada; he proposes that “the existence of this variety has encouraged Canadians to regard religious affiliation as a matter of choice” (241). For Page and other writers, then, the realities of contemporary Canadian life had changed. Immigration and cultural diffusion had transformed the country’s religious landscape, undermining Christianity’s already besieged monopoly on the “truth” and replacing it with a plurality of religious options both old and new.

What is more, in literary circles throughout the world, the “geography of mobility and interculturality” that Susan Stanford Friedman claims for modernism (428) made possible the diffusion of religious texts across the putative East-West divide—including

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224. By the 1960s, non-Christian religions or emergent movements such as modern Theosophy and spiritualism had long since made their presence felt in Canadian (as well as American and British) society through literature, magazine culture, and printing. Moreover, as Smaro Kamboureli has noted, “The land we now call Canada was already multicultural, and multilingual, before the arrival of the first Europeans” (xxviii)—and I would expand this statement to emphasize that Canada was also religiously plural prior to European contact, since Indigenous Canadian religious traditions were, and still are, multiple.

texts such as Shah's perennialist teachings and the immensely popular Sufi poetry of Rumi, which greatly influenced Page's own writing.<sup>225</sup> Of course, what Friedman calls "modernism's internationalism" also resulted in "its primitivist embrace of the non-Western Other as a means for revitalizing the various sterilities of the West" (428)—and the strain of Sufism promulgated by Shah can easily be read in these terms. Even so, his perennialist philosophy could also be said to offer more than a simplistic "primitivist embrace" by rejecting the monopolizing claims of Western religions; it promotes a worldview that, by virtue of its celebration of geographically dispersed and still-vital religious traditions, emphatically resists what Friedman, drawing on the work of the geographer J.M. Blaut, refers to as "the ideology of European diffusionism" (429). In other words, Shah's Sufism, like the internationally diffuse modernist culture to which it responded and in which it played an active role, contained within itself both primitivist and non-primitivist tendencies.

Such questions aside, one might also productively consider Page's Sufism from a more localized, biographical perspective. What does it mean to refer to Page's Sufism as a form of "personal" religion, for example, when it took shape as a result of her close friendships with women such as Jori Smith, Carrington and Kent, Pat Martin Bates, and Shushan Egoyan, or through her selfless work as the "deputy" (Djwa 215) of a Sufi study group in Victoria, which started in the 1960s and continued at least into the 1980s? Her unpublished Sufi group study notes show her awareness of their individual and collective need to move beyond personal religion in its strictest and most prohibitive sense,<sup>226</sup>

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225. See, for example, Page's interview with Jon Pearce ("Fried Eggs" 152), or "The Sense of Angels: Reflections on A.M. Klein" (68).

226. See Page's Sufi study notes (Library and Archives Canada, P.K. Page fonds, R2411, Volume 141, File 8, binder) for her comments on such topics as the "differing demands

although the formation of this group effectively set into motion some of the same processes of institutionalization against which Shah had warned (ironically so, since he presided over the London-based Institute for Cultural Research, a centralized organization that curated and codified Shah’s Sufi philosophy through its many publications). And Page’s Sufism had several other public facets: she worked as a promoter or agent for Octagon Press, arranging for the sale of Shah’s books at multiple stores in British Columbia and approaching distributors such as Raincoast Books and Cannon Book Distribution.<sup>227</sup> Such activities seem to appear only in Page’s biography, and yet I would argue that they provide compelling evidence of her ongoing struggle to live according to—and cautiously share—her esoteric belief system, all without letting it actually become a “system” or an “institution” in the Jamesian sense.

For his part, Shah had confidently avowed that “the Sufis do not erect systems as one would build an edifice, for succeeding generations to examine and learn from” (“Author’s Preface” xxiv). But even the Idries Shah Foundation’s website directly contradicts its namesake. The foundation’s stated objective is

To promote tolerance and cultural understanding by the dissemination of contemporary Sufi ideas as widely as possible throughout the world.

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of the members from the group” (4) and the need for “a team spirit” (18; emphasis in original).

227. See Page’s fonds at Library and Archives Canada for evidence of how, as a representative of Octagon Press, Page arranged for the sale of Shah’s books at Hawthorne Books and Munro’s Books in Victoria (R2411, Volume 123, File 20, typescript, 5 May 1994; R2411, Volume 123, File 20, typescript, 23 February 1995; R2411, Volume 123, File 20, typescript, 20 July 1995), and at Curious Coho in Port Alberni (R2411, Volume 123, File 20, typescript, 20 July 1995 [2]). She also shared news of Octagon’s success in getting “a Canadian distributor—Cannon Book Distribution Ltd.” (R2411, Volume 123, File 20, typescript, 20 July 1995 [2]) and mentioned having “approached Raincoast to see if they would distribute Octagon books” (R2411, Volume 123, File 20, typescript, 4 July 1994).

We aim to translate the works of Idries Shah into Eastern languages in order to help preserve Sufi ideas and values within the Islamic world, where they originated. (“About”)

Two lines later, after championing Shah “as a cultural bridge between East and West,” the page also includes the remark—again, contra Shah himself—that “The Idries Shah Foundation exists to make sure that the work of Idries Shah remains available.” And note, too, how the second objective quoted above scales back the perennialist ambition of Shah’s own writings, situating Sufism exclusively in relation to Islam.<sup>228</sup>

Ultimately, despite Shah’s contentions, and despite Graves’s argument that “Sufi teachers do their best to discourage disciples” (xxi), Page’s Sufi poetry, plays, children’s books, and study group seem designed with exactly the opposite objective in mind. It is therefore odd to read, in Steffler’s introduction to *Mexican Journal*, that Page’s diary-writing “marked the beginning of a sustained practice of keeping private or even secret the record of the role of Sufism in her life,” thereby setting “a pattern that continued for the rest of Page’s life: the avoidance of any public discussion of her personal involvement

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228. By singling out Islam in this manner, and particularly by claiming that Shah’s teachings “originated” from Islam, the Idries Shah Foundation is effectively characterizing Shah’s Sufism as an Islamic sect—a characterization which patently undermines Shah’s own frequently contested claims about the perennialist nature of Sufism. Curiously, in an endnote, Djwa wittingly performs a similar re-classification when she states that “Shah’s organization fulfilled much of the criteria for a sect” (360). Her straw-man argument that Shah’s teachings “narrow traditional Sufism by divorcing it from Islam”—she has just told us that “Idries Shah, Doris Lessing, and Robert Graves have stated in various venues that the Sufism that Shah advocated is not Islamic and not a sect” (360)—suggests that she refuses to accept as valid one of the central premises of Shah’s Sufism: its perennialism. This valuation is framed to cast doubts on Shah’s philosophy, certainly; however, by extension, it also implicitly devalues the substance, though not necessarily the idiosyncratic expression, of Page’s Sufi beliefs and writings, which were inextricably linked to those of Shah.

in Sufism” (16). Similarly, Djwa maintains that Page’s friends “glimpsed her deep immersion in the Sufi way. But none of this was apparent to the casual observer. There were few external markings of the ferocious internal journey that she was undertaking” (237). As early as 1969, however, Page had publicly shown her perennialist hand in “Questions and Images,” just as her internationally lauded poetry, prose, and visual art made her Sufi sympathies increasingly obvious to those critics who have already written about these “external markings” as evidence of her “ferocious internal journey.” Page’s study group also entered the community quietly but apparently without fear of making itself visible, since it rented out public meeting and workshop spaces, advertised to bring in new recruits, organized fundraisers, and performed puppet shows for children.<sup>229</sup> With all of this evidence in plain sight, one might reasonably ask to what extent Page’s Sufism really could be considered “a private quest for illumination” (Djwa 237). Djwa does admit that, in the 2000s, Page “became increasingly active in endorsing the Sufi teaching story” (309), but again, a good number of publications had long since made her religious views known. While Page may not have trumpeted her Sufism to “the casual observer” as blatantly as Avison did her born-again Christianity, I hope to have demonstrated how her acclaimed poetry’s deployment of Sufi symbols and mystical discourses—together with her forthright interviews, her teaching plays and stories, her Sufi group studies, and her distribution work for Octagon Press—makes it difficult for critics to interpret her post-1960s activities as anything but the persistent, “external” signs of her commitment to Sufism.

Even if one concedes that Page’s Sufism was inspired by a charlatan, Shah’s religious philosophy nevertheless helped her produce what is, by most literary-critical

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229. See, for example, Djwa (237).



accounts, a multifaceted, shimmering body of poetry; for most, the poetic ends seem to have justified the unorthodoxly religious means. And in any case, Page's poetry serves as a revealing record of a personal journey of spiritual growth that simultaneously reflects larger contemporary and historical contexts, such as those hinted at in her allusions to various perennialist, mystical, and Sufi traditions. Yet Page's Sufi poetry might be said to initiate a tradition all its own—and by virtue of the same kinds of syncretistic processes that have led to the creation of new sects, new denominations, and new religions throughout history: the Orientalism alluded to by Elwell-Sutton, for example, or the restless experimentation of a postwar Canadian society in which unorthodox religious beliefs and traditions proliferated as new generations sought meaning both within and outside of long-dominant Western institutions. Indeed, like Dudek's idiosyncratic vision of Atlantis, Page's perennialist, pluralistic Sufi poetry brilliantly underscores Luckhurst's contention that "Modernity does not demolish religious belief. If anything, Nietzsche's philosophizing with a hammer only shattered the theistic impulse into pieces that have developed several numinous lives of their own" (430). To read Page's kaleidoscopic poetry is to encounter such a numinous life: a life of jagged edges and dazzling contradictions; a life of shifting perspectives, arranged and re-arranged before our eyes; an indeterminate life of possibilities, which threatens always "to shift and flux and flow" ("Kaleidoscope" 36).

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

In the preceding pages, I have argued that the Jamesian notion of personal religion is sufficiently broad to account for the Christian-spiritualist beliefs of E.J. Pratt, the devotional and non-denominational Christianity of Margaret Avison, the transcendental-realist atomism of Louis Dudek, and the Idries Shah-inspired Sufism of P.K. Page. In this way, my study has attempted to prove that the notion of personal religion, as it gained traction throughout the twentieth century in response to a host of new social and religious contexts, remained a coherent framework faithful to James's original articulation of it while also proving itself equal to the task of accommodating an increasingly evident plurality of religious experiences and traditions, including those not usually considered under the rubric of religion. Still, just as James never fully resolves the problems attending personal religion's necessary transition into social and pragmatic forms, or its seemingly inevitable crystallization into creeds and theologies, we have seen how Pratt, Avison, Dudek, and Page sometimes dramatize rather than resolve the paradoxes of personal religion in their poetry. Yet this recurrent, unresolved tension between the personal and the institutional, the private and the public, is arguably what makes their poetry most effective as a barometer of contemporary religious concerns.

As we have also seen, this tension between personal and institutional religion animates their poetry in an aesthetic sense; it is the shared Jamesian soil from which their diverse poetics spring, highlighting at once both the continued popularity of the anti-doctrinal position outlined in *Varieties* as well as the extent to which this kind of sentiment could foster such radically different responses to the problems of religion. That

is, Pratt, Avison, Dudek, and Page each transform various aspects of James's philosophy of religion to make it their own, to make it new and newly relevant to their own experiences and literary needs. As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, Pratt's theologically modernist orientation and syncretistic accommodation of spiritualist concerns prove that, however unfashionable his epic narratives and their fascination with "grand themes" (Kamboureli, *On the Edge* 30) may appear from our current vantage point, he was innovative in ways that few critics have acknowledged, given their characterization of him either as an orthodox Christian poet or as a man whose experiences of loss had turned him away from religion altogether. Pratt's Christian-spiritualist syncretism suggests the possibility of a third way, one which serves as the basis for nuanced interpretations of both his long poems and his intensely personal, mystical lyrics of the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, as I established in Chapter Three, Avison's merger of modernist and evangelical Christian discourses of the new complicates literary-critical narratives which have read her post-conversion poetry as a species of orthodox liturgy or proselytization, rather than as a radically personal and necessarily conflicted project of self-narration that is predicated not on institutional formulas, but on a poetics of listening and reconciliation.

Because the first half of my study focuses on the religious experiences and expression of two Christian poets, it is worth considering how I might have opened myself up to the same kinds of criticism faced by James. Most notably, critics have justifiably pointed out how *Varieties* "dramatically reconstituted the experience of Protestant supernaturalists" (Taves 352); as Daniel L. Pals explains, James "proposes to make a universal argument, applicable to all of human religious experience and anchored

by direct evidence,” yet his evidence is drawn largely from Protestants in the United States and England (217). While my own study finds James’s notion of personal religion applicable in a wide variety of twentieth-century religious contexts, it tries to avoid any universal claims—and I would argue that James himself was not so deluded as to suggest that his lectures on the nature of religion, for instance, should be received as anything other than what he calls an “arbitrary definition our field” (31). In this respect, I am in total agreement with Charles Taylor, who writes that “it would be churlish, even absurd, to hold against him that his discussion didn’t relate very closely to the practice of Hindus in contemporary India. That wasn’t his main focus, which was really about religion as we know it [in] our culture (although there is the occasional reference outside, to, e.g., the Buddha and al-Ghazzali)” (*Varieties of Religion* 20). In my own case, too, an exploration of the Christian contexts of poets such as Pratt and Avison seemed necessary, given that Christianity was inarguably—and to a lesser extent still remains—a major religious and cultural force in Canada. An analysis of the Christian poetry of Pratt and Avison enabled me to examine the now-documented shift towards personal religions as it affected the various branches of the Protestant church, which, for a majority of English-speaking Canadians at mid-century, constituted “religion” writ large.

The second half of my dissertation proves how James’s philosophy—whether or not it is simply a form of Protestantism operating under the aegis of pluralism—is amenable to, and quickly took on new significations within, a variety of socio-cultural contexts in the postwar period. As I demonstrated in these later chapters, the definitions of religion and personal religion sketched out by James are amply broad to encompass the unorthodoxly religious views of Dudek and Page. For James, as for Dudek, Page, and

countless other non-Christians or unconventional “searchers” like them, “Religion, whatever it is, is a [person]’s total reaction upon life, so why not say that any total reaction upon life is a religion?” (*Varieties* 35). In Chapter Four, I described how Dudek’s poetry, with its adaptation of atomist philosophy and the utopian idea of Atlantis, conveyed his “total reaction upon life.” For Dudek, as for Pratt and Avison, his religious and aesthetic projects are also intimately connected: long poems such as *Atlantis* illustrate the extent to which his “functional” poetics had transformed his writing, but also the extent to which this poetics was grounded in an atomist and transcendental vision of reality. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discussed Page’s creative rendering of Sufi ideas and imagery as another example of a “total reaction upon life,” outlining Shah’s Sufism and its influence on her perennialist, pluralist poetics. As I asserted there, Page’s Sufism served as the ultimate intellectual and religious framework for her art; however, Page consistently worked against the processes of banalization that James associated with institutional religion, even as she sought to translate her personal Sufi philosophy into an internally coherent but increasingly public-facing poetry.

Despite my claims that James’s notion of personal religion can be applied in a wide variety of twentieth-century religious contexts, I have only begun to do this work myself; moreover, I have occasionally neglected to comment at length on the place of Pratt, Avison, Dudek, and Page in relation to other Canadian poets or to Canadian literature as a whole, since my aim in providing alternative intellectual, religious, and socio-cultural contexts for the genesis and reception of their writing has been to gesture towards the aspects of their respective oeuvres that would be most diminished through a sustained insistence on domestic rather than international affinities. In my attempt to

highlight the poetry and personal religions of these four figures, I have necessarily left out many other Canadian poets whose work would both reinforce and productively complicate my findings. Notable exclusions include other Christian or lapsed-Christian poets such as Robin Blaser, Dennis Lee, Anne Szumigalski, and Tim Lilburn; prominent Jewish-Canadian poets such as A.M. Klein, Miriam Waddington, and Leonard Cohen; multi-lingual poets such as the English- and Punjabi-language writer Ajmer Rode, who has helped translate Sufi lyrics into English; and Indigenous poets such as Peter Blue Cloud, Duke Redbird, and Rita Joe. Given the above discussion of James, however, it bears repeating that his notion of personal should be applied with caution; in the case of studies of Indigenous poets and spirituality in Canada, for example, critics should be aware not only of any relevant cultural protocols, but also of the ways in which interpreting Indigenous spiritualities through the historically Western, Christian lens of personal religion might unwittingly yet problematically distort or overwrite them.

And there are many other exclusions that could be mentioned—in part because Canada’s increasing postwar diversity has not always been evident in the national literary canon or in the dominant literary-critical narratives that shaped it. For example, in *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada* (1967), which crafts a history of Canadian poetry whose biases still inform contemporary critical narratives, Dudek and Gnarowski call Canada a nation composed of two cultures (247). In an essay penned the following year, Dudek repeatedly reinforces this bicultural rather than multicultural model of national literature by referring to “the dual tradition, the bilingual nature of Canadian literature” (“Nationalism” 261).<sup>230</sup> This kind of narrative effectively divides the nation into two linguistic and cultural halves, French and English—but of course the reality of the

situation was much more complex, and not just in terms of language or culture. In terms of religious expression, the literary scene had already changed dramatically enough by the 1960s that, as I discussed, Avison's unapologetically Christian poetry made her somewhat of an exception among her peers. As F.R. Scott's "The Canadian Authors Meet" had rather pointedly suggested almost four decades earlier (albeit somewhat prematurely, given Pratt's continued popularity), Canadian poets of note would no longer be "measured for their faith and philanthropics, / Their zeal for God and King" (11-12). Instead, the unorthodox, syncretic, and quasi-religious forms of expression engendered in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg or other counter-cultural figures who met at the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963 appear much more representative of this post-Pratt period as a whole.

Yet this narrative, too, provides only a partial view: other factors, such as a spike in non-European immigration to Canada in the 1960s, also meant that traditional religions other than Christianity were also being represented in Canadian poetry. As Paul Bramadat and David Seljak explain, such forms of religious and artistic expression became increasingly common as "Canadian immigration policies responded to broader progressive tendencies reshaping liberal democracies in the post-World War II period" (227). But again, these minority and marginalized poetics did not receive, and have not yet received, a significant amount of critical attention; the true variety of religious experiences in Canada has not been widely acknowledged in most literary-critical narratives of the twentieth century, and the notion of personal religions provides one possible means of widening critics' scope of inquiry beyond the most obvious—that is, the most orthodox—articulations of such experiences.

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230. See also Kamboureli ("Introduction" xv).

Despite personal religion's limitations, then, I would contend that its essentially pluralistic and syncretistic nature make it particularly well-suited to contemporary reconsiderations of literary modernisms as globally dispersed, heterogeneous networks of cultural production. By identifying syncretistic tendencies of each of the poets in this study, I have foregrounded some of the mechanisms according to which religion both continued to survive in mid- to late-twentieth-century poetry and was rendered resistant to traditional classifications; that is, I have shown how syncretistic processes are essential not only to the kinds of personal religion on display here, but also more broadly, to the formation, dissolution, and re-constitution of individual and collective religious views. What is more, literary modernism's diverse engagements with religion suggest that syncretism, while certainly not unique to the twentieth century, provides critics with a useful means of interpreting forms of religious expression in relation to the material realities and socio-cultural phenomena that transformed the modern world.

In a recent study of syncretism, *In Praise of Mixed Religion: The Syncretism Solution in a Multifaith World*, William H. Harrison observes that multiple religions have fought to stop or reverse syncretistic processes, viewing syncretism in a negative light—and sometimes for very good reasons, considering “syncretism does not always result in beneficial development” (130). Still, in my examination of Canadian modernist poetry, I have attempted to evince how syncretism can productively challenge our understanding of religion, religious change, and even the concept of religious orthodoxy. Indeed, to what extent are terms such as orthodoxy useful if, as Harrison claims, “everyone's religion is a syncretism” (227)? My own study, like Harrison's, proceeds on the assumption that “Even if we dismiss syncretism in principle, we do not have the option of



rejecting it in practice. No amount of historical digging will enable us to reach some sort of pure religion uninfluenced by other traditions” (17). However, I have been less interested here in locating examples of religious syncretism in twentieth century poetry than I have been in examining how individual expressions of faith need to be adumbrated against—and perhaps read as symptomatic of—the syncretistic and shifting nature of ostensibly orthodox religions themselves. In my chapters on Pratt and Avison, for example, I detailed the ways in which syncretism has modified Christianity from within: in Pratt’s case, his spiritualist conversion was part of a self-consciously syncretistic quest taken in response both to the pains of personal loss and to the outmoded rubrics of institutional religion; as a result of his education at Victoria University, and like the theological modernists of his time, he affirmed religious syncretism as an unavoidable and necessary historical reality. Like other literary modernists before her, Avison instead blurred lines between modernist and evangelical Christian discourses of the new by deploying epiphanic language in her post-conversion poetry and prose; yet, as I explained with reference to the findings of North American and Canadian sociologists and scholars of religion, Avison placed Christianity and literary modernism in dialogue—a key word for her—at a time when mutual exchange between these two domains seemed least likely.

In my chapters on Dudek and Page, I also detailed some of the ways that personal religions have blurred lines between secular and religious thought, identifying the interdependencies and syncretistic tendencies of each. As we saw with both of these poets, syncretism has been involved in the formation of religious positions not easily classifiable in relation to established institutional religions or to secular philosophies. In T.S. Eliot’s post-conversion prose, the revered modernist poet seems to have been wary

of the dangers of syncretism because of his need to maintain distinctions between what he called a “Christian society,” “a Pagan Society,” and “a Neutral Society” (“Idea” 6)—or because of his corollary desire to prevent “the general lowering of culture” (“Notes” 154). By contrast, the poets in this study rely on and acknowledge syncretistic forces as an essential aspect of their unique religious and artistic identities. As I suggested with reference to poems such as *En México* and *Atlantis*, for example, Dudek’s syncretistic personal religion might be read as a challenge to Émile Durkheim’s binary opposition of the sacred and the profane; his poetry, with its accommodation of religious language, a transcendental perspective, and atomist philosophy, clearly indicates that, for all of Dudek’s anti-institutional rhetoric, the idea of God remained for him an omnipresent and inspiring challenge to accepted ways of being in, and thinking about, the material world. As I have already argued, one of Dudek’s many complaints about the Christian church was its refusal to acknowledge its syncretistic and selective borrowings from ancient Greek thinkers—the kinds of borrowings that Pratt, embracing the theologically modernist concept of cultural adaptation, had addressed directly in his doctoral dissertation. For Page, as well, syncretism was an unavoidable fact, and it provided her with her explicitly syncretistic Fourth Way; she adopted and adapted Shah’s esoteric, perennialist Sufism, claiming it as her own neither as a form of Islamic mysticism nor as a completely naturalized philosophy of life. Like Avison’s poetics of listening and reconciliation, Page’s kaleidoscopic poetics effects a reconciliation between conflicting perspectives. And this kind of reconciliation, while sometimes incomplete or imperfect, is exactly what I have claimed that works such as “Kaleidoscope” enable; while Page relied on the metaphor of seeing, and Avison on listening, in order to communicate this idea,

both effectively transformed their poems into textual spaces where multiple perspectives could be represented.

In closing, I would note that the “rise” of personal religions identified in the title of this study refers not to a sharp and sudden rise, or to a phenomenon observable only in the modernist period (however delimited), but rather to a continued acceleration, throughout the twentieth century, of trends already evident in North American religion and culture; what we see here, perhaps, is an apotheosis of sorts, with poets such as Pratt, Avison, Dudek, and Page serving as just four examples of how this widespread shift played out in the Canadian context. And the adjective “modernist” in my title is also significant for reasons other than those I have already explored, both explicitly and tacitly, in the preceding pages: in particular, the notion of person religion, as I have outlined it here, contributes to ongoing critical discussions about periodization by complicating narratives of late-modernist or postmodernist difference predicated on the now-discredited secularization thesis. Consider, for instance, Robert Genter’s *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*. While Genter’s book is a timely and welcome addition to the expanding modernist field, it effectively writes religion out of late modernism. As Genter suggests, “the traditional story” is an unsatisfactory one (“I want to posit a more complex version of late modernism” [10]); however, he himself fails to offer a corrective to this traditional narrative of mid-century modernism that accounts for the complex ways in which religious experience survived in the poetry of late modernists and postmodernists. Ironically, his call for “a more complex version of late modernism” reductively equates secularization with “a *maturing* of modernism” (10; emphasis in original), even as he treats things like “the more mystical

claims of romantic modernism” as a homogeneous set of beliefs to be “overcom[e]” (10). At best, his treatment of religion in modernist literature is cursory, a side-note to his real concerns; at worst, it reproduces some of the aspects of “the traditional story”—such as the substitutionary art-as-religion formula discussed in my chapter on Dudek—that recent critics have worked to repudiate.

At this juncture in my own narrative, it should be eminently clear that personal religions, like literary modernisms, cut across historical and literary periods; just as syncretistic forces have given rise to non-doctrinal and pluralistic expressions of religious sentiment—as in the disparate cases of Pratt and Page—personal religions blur the lines critics have sometimes drawn in an attempt to distinguish between one literary movement and the next, between pre-disestablishment peaks of religious fervour and assumed religiosity on the one hand, and the supposed post-disestablishment trough of religious doubt and decline on the other. Although poets such as Avison, Dudek, and Page were active in the second half of the twentieth century, they were surely not postmodernist poets, if by postmodernism one means “a loosely defined movement determined to debunk simultaneously the elitist posturing of high modernism and the metaphysical claims of romantic modernism” (Genter 314). All of them affirm the transcendental in profound ways; they do not uniformly consider metaphysical claims as something they need to “debunk.” What narratives such as Genter’s remind us, then, is that new narratives of modernist and late-modernist literature are still necessary.

Of course, one would also do well to consider what an overly myopic focus on personal religions and the syncretistic processes that form them could mean in the long term: Ann Taves warns her readers of ignoring “the study of religion *per se*” in favour of

“the *processes* by which religious and nonreligious phenomena are made and unmade”; if we focus only on the latter, she writes, “we lose a sense of religion (or not-religion) as a substantive thing” (361; emphasis in original). But, time and again, Pratt, Avison, Dudek, and Page wrestle with such distinctions, repeatedly dramatizing and working through the problems involved in translating their personal, seemingly ineffable religious convictions into “a substantive thing”: their poetry. And yet, by focusing on this poetry, and by focusing on the notion of personal religion as it is manifested in this poetry, one also gains a better sense of both religion and modernism as fairly insubstantial things—that is, as diffuse, heterogeneous, and contradictory amalgams of movements and impulses whose precise articulation belies their pluralistic nature.

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