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Re-envisioning Religious Discourses as Rhetorical Resources in Composition Teaching: A Pragmatic Response to the Challenge of Belief

In this essay, I offer William James's notion of pragmatic belief as a framework for re-envisioning religious discourses as rhetorical resources in composition teaching. Adopting a Jamesian pragmatic framework in composition teaching, I argue, entails two pragmatic adjustments to current approaches. The first adjustment concerns the way we think about the relationship between academic discourse and religious discourse. And the second adjustment relates to the stances we adopt when responding to religious students' texts. Along with outlining these adjustments, I illustrate the ways James's framework productively informed my response to a faith-based narrative that an evangelical student wrote in one of my first-year writing courses.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many of our students—and many of us, I'm sure—but it's a dimension almost never mentioned by those who talk about cultural diversity and difference. In most classrooms in which there is an obvious political agenda, students—even graduate students—are very reluctant to reveal their religious belief, sensing they may get a hostile reception. . . . But a teacher who believes in diversity must pay attention to and respect students with deep religious convictions, not force them into silence.
—Maxine Hairston, "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing"

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Since Maxine Hairston's remarks in May of 1992, scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have given increased attention to the relationship between religious faith and the teaching of writing.[1] Collections such as Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, Mary McCaslin Thompson, and Elizabeth Bachrach Tan's *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief: Essays on Intellectual and Spiritual Life*, Walter Jost and Wendy Olmstead's *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry*, and Elizabeth Vander Lei and bonnie lenore kyburz's *Negotiating Religious Faith in the Composition Classroom* have urged compositionists to more fully embrace the ideals of pluralism and inclusiveness by opening the universe of discourse in our classrooms to the beliefs most significant to many students' lives. Through this rich body of scholarship, writing specialists in our field have been challenged to reconsider the aims of composition teaching, interrogate our disciplinary biases, and rethink our roles and responsibilities as teachers of writing.

While significant strides have been made toward understanding the ways that religious traditions might influence students' writing practices, critical questions regarding how to best prepare religious students to effectively utilize their faith commitments in academic writing contexts still remain unexamined: How might writing instructors encourage religious students to effectively draw upon their faith commitments to cultivate effective rhetorical practice in the composition classroom? How might composition specialists support students' efforts to merge their religious commitments and scholarly pursuits in university writing courses? What vocabularies might students use to effectively articulate their faith commitments in academic writing contexts?

This essay forwards a Jamesian pragmatic framework for re-envisioning students' religious discourses as rhetorical resources in composition teaching.

Such questions make evident a need in composition teaching to create spaces for students of faith to articulate their religious commitments, invent alternative terminologies with which to talk and think in more complex ways about the relationship between religious faith and composition instruction, and develop pedagogical strategies that will allow students and instructors to "use the tension between faith . . . and academic inquiry as a way of learning more and learning better" (Vander Lei 8). In an attempt to further advance these aims, this essay forwards a Jamesian pragmatic framework for re-envisioning students' religious discourses as rhetorical resources in composition teaching.

Since William James's pragmatic method is concerned with the consequences of beliefs, rather than first principles, he never rules out religious ideas. James's openness to faith-based ideas is evident in his discussion of the pragmatic method:

> Interested in no conclusions but those which our minds and our experiences work out together, she [the pragmatic method] has no a priori prejudices against theology. If theological ideas prove to have value in concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. ("What Pragmatism Means" 107)

Rather than looking at religious experiences through a lens of "medical materialism," which attempted to discredit such experiences by labeling them psychoses, James approached religious experiences with a genuine desire to learn more about them (*Varieties* 15). He recognized the important consequences of religious belief in the lives of many people and was unwilling to simply dismiss it as a kind of "neuroticism" (26). While he used his specialized knowledge and training in psychology to approach his research in this area of inquiry, he would not allow it to trump whatever else he might discover. In looking at religious experience as a scholar of psychology he hoped instead to "ascertain . . . more precisely in what its merits consist, by learning at the same time to what particular dangers of corruption it may also be exposed" (23). Such a stance, it seems to me, serves as a useful starting point for approaching religious students' texts, as well—one that, in Elizabeth Vander Lei's words, might allow religious students to more effectively draw upon their "religious faith to inspire and nurture effective rhetorical practice" (3).

Adopting a Jamesian pragmatic framework in composition teaching, I argue here, entails two pragmatic adjustments to our current approach. The first adjustment concerns the way we think about the relationship between academic discourse and religious discourse. And the second adjustment relates to the stances we adopt when responding to religious students' texts. In what follows, I thus begin with an examination of the problematic division that has been constructed between "academic discourse" and "religious discourse" in recent composition scholarship. In response to these discussions, I posit a pragmatic view of discourse that acknowledges the fluctuating nature of language and casts religious discourse as a resource for writing in academic contexts. I then outline the notion of pragmatic belief, as described in James's "The Will to Believe," in an effort to provide compositionists with a framework for re-envisioning students' religious discourses as worthy of respect and atten-

tion in composition teaching. In this portion of my discussion, I illustrate the ways James's framework productively informed my response to an evangelical student's faith-based narrative in a first-year writing course. Finally, I close with some possible suggestions for further composition research in this area of inquiry.

From Fixed to Fluid: The Possibility of Religious Discourses in the Academy

In "True Believers, Real Scholars, and True Believing Scholars: Discourses of Inquiry and Affirmation in the Composition Classroom," Douglas Downs discusses the discursive conflicts that university writing teachers may confront in their attempts to teach "Discourses of Inquiry" to students who have deep religious commitments. Invoking James Gee's theory of discourse and Foucault's notion of "discursive formations," Downs identifies several points of conflict between what he calls "Discourses of Affirmation," which are often employed by "true believers" (i.e., students of faith), and the "Discourses of Inquiry," which are valued and promoted by "real scholars" (i.e., academics) (41). Outlining the specific differences between these discourses, Downs writes:

> Inquiry suggests questioning as a valued source of knowledge, while Affirmation suggests a pre-existent source of knowledge to be valued. What "true believers" value as closed, fixed, permanent, and absolute, "real scholars" value as subjects to be opened. What "real scholars" value as knowledge creating, "true believers" find threatening to existing knowledge. Affirmation's final answer is Inquiry's opening question. Some enacting discourses of inquiry might accept some received knowledge; what distinguishes such "real scholars" from "true believers" is that the received knowledge is not exempt from critique, and a "real scholar" works to fit received knowledge and inquiry knowledge into a coherent framework. A Discourse of Affirmation, on the other hand, avoids questioning received knowledge (or defers questioning to superiors) and subordinates new knowledge to received knowledge. (44)

While Downs does not go so far as to claim that these divergent "ways of behaving, habits of mind, values and beliefs, epistemologies, and dispositions" will be enacted by all "true believers" or every "real scholar," he does posit that there is a close connection between these discourses and the communities he describes (44). In Downs's description, that is, "academic discourse" is placed in opposition to "religious discourse."

The effect of this split is that such discussions make it seem as if religious discourses are incommensurate with academic discourses. As a result, they

reduce the possibility of seeing religious discourses as resources on which students might draw to enrich their academic work. By treating these discourses as if they are mutually exclusive and fixed rather than overlapping and in flux, such discussions fail to account for the intersections between and constant change within every "discourse community" (Harris 100). Moreover, they limit the ways that we might understand the notion of belief, because the "true believer" in this scheme is portrayed as naive and anti-intellectual.

Another problem with treating religious discourse as antithetical to academic discourse is that it promotes the assumption that the only legitimate way for students to write about their faith in the academy is critically. Religious faith, in other words, must be treated as an object of interrogation to gain legitimacy in an academic context. When this is the case, writing instructors are constrained in the ways they might respond to students' uses of religious discourses. They are made to feel as if their only possibilities for dealing with expressions of faith are challenging students' religious viewpoints or teaching the language and posture of critique. If we accept Lizabeth Rand's claim that "spiritual identity may be the primary kind of selfhood that more than a few of [our students] draw upon in making meaning of their lives and the world around them," such a posture toward students' religious discourses becomes pedagogically ineffective and ethically questionable. By treating these discourses as "fixed varieties into and out of which writers can 'translate' their ideas without altering what is imagined to be the discrete nature of each," rather than as overlapping or complimentary, students are given the impression that they must become different "selves" in each context they enter (Horner and Lu 9).

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This limited view of discourse has significant implications for student writers as well as for instructors reading their texts. In some cases, it is likely to cause religious students anxiety, because they are apt to see their performances in academic contexts as false or hypocritical—even immoral or unethical. Further, by implying that students must compartmentalize their religious commitments, they could be made to feel as if they have to choose between their communities of faith and their affiliation with their disciplinary communities in the academy. Similarly, this fixed view of discourse is problematic in that it functions as a "terministic screen," preventing writing instructors from seeing the value of religious students' discursive resources (Burke, "Terministic" 59).

Given these shortcomings, it is important to consider how compositionists might re-imagine the seemingly irreconcilable division between discourses of the academy and discourses informed by students' religious belief systems from a pragmatic perspective. In the pragmatic tradition, the prevailing view is that "ideas are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability, but on their adaptability" (Menand, *Metaphysical* xi–xii). From this vantage, language, too, is understood to be a tool that "people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves" (xi–xii). Thus, the most suitable discourse is that which has the most "cash-value" to the tool user (James, "What Pragmatism Means" 97).

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From the perspective of pragmatism, discourse that seeks to convey the ever-shifting stream of human experience is never going to be static or stable but will always be in process, because its value is measured by its ability to adapt to the un-reproducible experiences of language users. In "What Pragmatism Means," James describes this pragmatic function of language in the following way:

> You know men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part, in magic, *words* have always played. If you have his name or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, the genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. . . . That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. "God," "Matter," "Reason," "the Absolute," "Energy" are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less a solution, then, than a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed. (97–98)

From this vantage point, we are no longer forced to choose between discourses. Instead, it becomes possible to see how students' religious discourses might contribute to discourses of the academy. In the final chapter of *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, Joseph Harris makes a convincing case for this

position by challenging the idea that "academic discourse" is fixed and stable, "something that has already been invented, a language that we have access to but that many of our students do not" (100). To this point, he convincingly writes:

> That we and our students belong to different and fairly distinct communities of discourse, that we have "our" "academic discourse" and they have "their own" "common" (?!) ones. The choice is one between two opposing fictions. The "languages" that our students bring to us cannot but have been shaped, at least in part, by their experiences in school, and thus must, in some ways, already be "academic." Similarly, our teaching will and should always be affected by a host of beliefs and values that we hold regardless of our roles as academics. What we see in the classroom, then, are not two coherent competing discourses but many overlapping and conflicting ones. (105)

In this scheme, religious students' discourses are seen not as barriers to critical inquiry but as resources that have the potential to contribute to the enterprise of knowledge making. By recognizing the fluctuating nature of language and the heterogeneity of language use that James and Harris make plain, instructors are less likely to dismiss language that deviates from so-called academic discourse—religious or otherwise—and are more likely to consider the possibility that students' deviations from this "standard" are deliberate and intentional. Rather than seeing their deviations as a sign of ignorance, they might be viewed as a "strategic design to create new discourses" (Canagarajah 591). An instructor working from this vantage is more apt to encourage religious students to draw upon a variety of discourses in their academic work, because they see their potential for invention. As Bizzell notes in her essay in *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy,* "New, alternative or mixed discourse forms are gaining ground because they allow their practitioners to do intellectual work in ways they could not if confined to traditional academic discourse. . . . These new discourses enable scholarship to take account of new variables, to explore new methods, and to communicate findings in new venues, including broader reading publics than the academic" (2–3). By thinking in these terms, compositionists are more likely to value the commitments and knowledge that students of faith bring to the writing classroom.

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(Re)Imagining the Contexts of Writing: A Pragmatic Approach to Religious Students' Texts

In order for writing instructors to fully recognize the value of the discursive resources that religious students bring to the writing classroom in the way that I am advocating, more than an alternative view of discourse is needed, however. To see religious students as agents who possess a variety of language resources and a range of knowledges that they might draw upon and utilize as writers in university settings, a more self-reflexive approach to reading religious students' texts is also necessary. In what follows, I posit a Jamesian notion of pragmatic belief as a framework for re-envisioning religious discourses as rhetorical resources in composition teaching.

In "The Will to Believe," William James offers "a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced" (69). James's "essay in justification *of* faith" sought to challenge the scholastic absolutism and prevailing faith of his day in "the doctrine of objective certitude," which held that the only beliefs worth holding were those that stemmed from a rational observer's unmediated apprehension of objective evidence (81). Privileging the role of reason to the exclusion of the human heart and the human will in the process of belief formation, the doctrine of objective certitude ruled out all beliefs that could not be verified by scientific testing or that violated the principles of formal logic. In an effort to expose the error of the doctrine of objective certitude and create space for religious belief, James shows the extent to which human passion and volition provide a basis for not only religious beliefs, but for all forms of belief. To exemplify this point, he states, "Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correlation of false belief are the supreme goods for man" (85). In fact, James states, some forms of knowledge—scientific or otherwise—would not exist were it not for the presence of belief prior to inquiry: "There are . . . cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create a fact*" (87). For this reason, James is unwilling to rule out any form of belief at the expense of others, for "*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent [him] from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule*" (90). Instead, he states,

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> No one ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance. (91)

Applying this principle of pluralism specifically to matters of religious belief, James writes,

> When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our hearts, instincts, and courage, and *wait*—acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true—till doomsday, or till such a time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough, this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave. Were we scholastic absolutists, there might be more excuse. If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively, in not waiting for its releasing word. But if we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then its seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell. Indeed we may wait if we will,—I hope you don't think I am denying that,—but if we do so, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. (91)

Like James, a majority of scholars in rhetoric and composition studies would claim that human knowledge is partial, situated, and open to revision and would argue that belief is a result of the human mind, emotions, and will working out experience together. The notion that there is absolute truth derived from an objective, neutral, decontextualized view from on high, most at this juncture would say, is an impossibility, and yet there persists a strong bias against religious perspectives on the basis of their "irrationality" and their "un-Truth" in the current academic climate. As Buley-Meissner, Thompson, and Tan note in the introduction to their recent collection *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief*:

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> Many students in undergraduate and graduate programs have been embarrassed, scorned, or shamed when they have acknowledged in class their religious backgrounds or faith traditions. The implicit (sometimes explicit) message from

> their teachers has been clear: To be educated means to be educated out of beliefs affirmed by church, temple, synagogue, or sacred circle. To be educated means to become an intellectual skeptic, an independent thinker whose judgments are based on material reason and logical analysis. (2)

Not only is this stance theoretically indefensible, but it also lacks pragmatic sense in that it limits the possibilities of knowledge making and cuts off a rich resource of knowledge for a significant number of students.[2] Because of this, we must attend carefully and respectfully to the intellectual and experiential components of students' religious lives in our responses to their discourses. Religious belief is a powerful force in the lives of many students and in the world at large.[3] Thus we cannot simply ignore it or ask students to do so. For these reasons, James is a great resource when considering how to respond to discourse generated through the force of students' religious beliefs.

A Pragmatic Response to Religious Discourse in the Composition Classroom

In the spring of 2009, I assigned a personal essay, a critical analysis essay, and a persuasive research essay in my honors first-year writing course at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). For each of these assignments, students could explore any area of inquiry that they were interested in understanding more fully. In response to these assignments, a Christian student named Thomas chose to craft a faith-based narrative describing the process by which he came to realize his professional calling, a critical analysis essay on the relevance of the Christian faith to UNH students, and a persuasive research essay inviting the students in the honors first-year writing course to explore the relevance of the Christian faith to their personal lives.[4] To explore the potential advantages—and challenges—of adopting a pragmatic stance when working with students of faith in composition teaching, in what follows I discuss the ways Jamesian pragmatism informed my response to Thomas's faith-based narrative.

From the outset of the 2009 semester, it was clear to me that Thomas was an intelligent and highly motivated student with a high regard for his academic work. With the career goal of becoming a pastor, Thomas saw his efforts in first-year writing as an opportunity to develop the literacy skills needed for his future pulpit and for the ministry work in which he is actively engaged on campus. This perspective gave each assignment purpose for Thomas and made all that he was reading and writing in class highly consequential. Because of this, he actively participated in class discussions, and his contributions in class

often demonstrated a high level of sophistication and critical discernment. Those qualities were also expressed in the writing assignments he turned in for the course. In conducting research for his analysis paper on the relevance of the Christian faith to college students at UNH, for example, he surveyed nearly sixty students and interviewed several more. For that paper alone, he wrote five drafts and conferenced with me four times. His persuasive research paper also required several drafts and even more time in conference to get it to a point with which he was satisfied. For each of these essays, Thomas drew upon nearly twenty sources and provided thoughtful, fair-minded, and nuanced representations of the various stakeholders he was engaging. Through these essays, Thomas maintained the kind of critical distance from his subject that is highly valued in academic contexts. His personal essay, however, broke from this stance. Unlike his analysis and persuasive essays, Thomas's personal essay wholeheartedly affirms his religious beliefs—a move that enables much of the meaningful work that Thomas's essay, "In Search of Identity," is doing.[5]

For their personal essay assignment, Thomas and his classmates were asked to identify a moment of significance in their lives and compose an essay that conveyed the importance of that experience to readers. Thomas's paper is a segmented essay, organized as a series of twenty-one journal entries that alternate among the distant past, the recent past, and the present. The overarching organizational device that Thomas uses to frame this series of journal entries is 2 Corinthians 4:8–10—a Bible verse that helped him make sense of the range of seemingly disparate experiences that he connects in his essay.[6] The essay begins and ends with the entire scripture, and portions of the verse are used as headings for the various parts of the story Thomas is telling. The purpose of the essay as a whole is to communicate the way Thomas's experience at a Christian retreat in the summer of 2008 helped him heal from the confusion of a broken relationship with his high school girlfriend and rediscover his identity as a Christian who desires to become a pastor.

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The essay's first segment begins with an entry describing the fulfillment Thomas is experiencing in the relationship with his high school girlfriend, Jen, but quickly moves to an entry that relates the loneliness, confusion, and despair he feels after their sudden breakup. It is here that the struggle concerning Thomas's faith is first introduced:

> June 3, 2008: Dear Diary, It's not enough that Jen broke up with me; no, she had to have some kind of spiritual purpose and a reason for doing it. She even quoted me verses from the Bible. How am I supposed to answer that? Psalm 27:14 "Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord." You know what, no thank you. I hate that verse. What does it even mean? "Take heart," some strange spiritual metaphor.

A bit later in the essay, Thomas includes this entry, describing the fragility of his faith after his split with Jen:

> July 15, 2008: Dear Diary, I keep thinking that someday I am going to wake up and feel close to God again—that I will wake up and everything from the last two months will turn out to just be a bad dream. But, it never is, and each day I face the reality that bleakly hangs over me . . . Ever since I broke up with Jen, I feel like God is nowhere to be found. Just when I needed him most, he has up and left. I read my bible every day, but I just don't feel drawn the way I used to. What's happening with me? Why can't I get a hold of myself? God, I am trying to fix this, but I just don't know how. I have just never felt so alone, and I don't think anyone gets it.

While the separation from Jen is significant in that it creates the dissonance needed to propel Thomas into an urgent exploration of self, Thomas makes it clear to readers in a later entry that the negotiation of his Christian identity has been an ongoing process:

> June 25, 2008: Dear Diary . . . [W]hile my school called me to be an individual, to stand out, my peers ridiculed me for it. I took a stand about abstinence, and my peers called me gay; I took a stand about faith, and my peers called me intolerant; I took a stand by working hard to get good grades, and my peers called me an over-achiever. It was much easier to go with the grain in school, let my voice be silenced, and stop standing out. Get through each day like a shadow, only a fraction of who I wanted to be, careful to never get stepped on, but never fully true to myself. I couldn't outrun the judgments, so I embraced them.

At a point where Thomas is hurting emotionally from his breakup with Jen and experiencing a deeper sense of isolation from his peers as a result of attempting to act on his beliefs, he is invited to a summer retreat for Christian undergraduates one week before the start of his first semester at UNH. While he is at first hesitant to attend the retreat, he decides to go. It is this experience that Thomas describes as a major turning point. Here are the two segments Thomas uses to convey this gradual shift to readers. The first reads:

> August 24, 2008: Dear Diary, I feel like God is calling me to surrender to him, surrender my hopes, my goals, and even my identity. For so long I have wanted to

> fit in with my friends, to make a name for myself, but I feel like God is trying to show me that he has a special and unique name already prepared for me. Today, as I was reading my Bible, I came across Romans 12:1–2 which says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." This retreat has been great so far, but I still don't know if I am ready to "trust God's will." I mean, look at my summer. I guess I just need to spend some more time praying about this.

And the second passage states:

> August 26, 2008: Dear Diary . . . Morning prayer started off sitting in a small, slightly crowded room joined together in body and spirit with 20 other people. The profound feeling of the presence of the Holy Spirit is a weight and a heat that surrounds you and fills your lungs with every breath, as if the air were somehow thicker. Yet it is comforting, like the warm embrace of a parent; it removes all distractions, and I am at peace . . . Then, after worship, we transitioned into the retreat of silence. Two and a half hours by myself in total silence. At first, I was very intimidated by this, two hours alone with my thoughts with all the confusion in my life at this point. But as I picked a comfortable spot under a tree and looked out over the lake, peace crept back in. During the silence, I spent a long time reflecting on my life and praying for God to reveal whatever he has been trying to show me. This time I was willing to wait, willing to take heart, and eagerly I anticipated an answer. In the quiet, God slowly revealed to me a lot more than I bargained for.

In closing his essay, Thomas includes a final segment in which he offers the insight he wants the narrative to convey:

> January 31, 2009: Dear Diary . . . So the question remains, who am I? And who am I going to be? . . . Ephesians 4:1–3 . . . says, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Reading this aloud, I wondered to myself, what is my calling? Is it worthy? How could I ever know? Of the many lessons God taught me through this summer, this stands out as the most significant: For a long time, I felt a calling to ministry. It's hard to describe, but I just had a feeling inside of me that it was right for me . . . After I finally conceded to this and decided to pursue this new goal, my identity for daily living began to make more sense to me. Regardless of what anyone else tries to tell me, I have decided I want to be a person who lives my life in a way that leaves everyone I come in contact with changed for the better. I want to live a life of self-denial and of service and love of others. I want to live as 1 Corinthians 16:13 says, "Be on your guard; stand

> firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. Do everything in love." This notion is forever tattooed on my wrist in the shape of a cross. Die in one direction, representing my daily death to myself, and live in the other, reminding me to live entirely for Christ. In the end, I think the apostle Paul said it best when he wrote Philippians 3:8, which says, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I might gain Christ." While I have lost many things in my life, God has always been there to pull me through. Slowly but surely, I have learned that the relationship I have with him is more valuable than anything I could ever attain on this earth. Jesus made a name for me when he died on the cross, and he is ahead of me preparing a place for me in heaven. How can I but live for him?

There are several aspects of this essay that might be dismissed by academic readers as inappropriate for a university-level composition course. Thomas's frequent use of scripture without providing interpretation or context, for example, might be viewed as problematic in that he seems to assume that readers will share his understanding of the texts quoted or that these texts simply speak for themselves. Related to this, I suspect that Thomas's appropriation of scriptural language to describe his experiences might trouble some readers, as well. Throughout the essay, he employs phrases such as "the presence of the Holy Spirit," "God's will," and "surrender to Him" as well as terms like "calling," "grace," and "ministry," but he does not explain their specific meanings in his faith tradition or his personal understanding of them. He uses them, instead, as if they are accessible to all readers, which may indicate that he views the meanings of these terms as self-evident. This use of scripture and the language of scripture might be viewed by some readers as a form of intellectual laziness, a replacement for rigorous thinking, or a barrier to invention. Rather than working out his experiences in fresh language, some might say, he is mimicking the commonplaces of his church, letting someone else do his thinking for him. Moreover, Thomas might be challenged by some audiences for his dependence on the Bible and church doctrine to frame his experience, as they could function as terministic screens that severely limit what is possible for Thomas to say and think.

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It is not only the ways that Thomas integrates biblical texts and biblical language into his essay that may concern some readers, but the wholehearted and unqualified ways in which he adopts the language of those texts to articulate his personal beliefs. Thomas's discussion of self-surrender, in particular,

might alarm some readers. When he writes, for example, "I know now that the only way to live is total surrender to Him," or "I feel like God is calling me to surrender to him, surrender my hopes, my goals, and even my identity," some readers could experience discomfort, thinking inwardly that this is the kind of uncritical acceptance that leaves one vulnerable to dupery and deception of all sorts. Likewise, I can imagine some audiences having difficulty with the optimism and unqualified professional and personal mission Thomas defines for himself: "Regardless of what anyone else tries to tell me, I have decided I want to be a person who lives my life in a way that leaves everyone I come in contact with changed for the better."

Although it is possible to level some of these criticisms against Thomas's essay, to dismiss the essay on these grounds alone would mean ignoring much of the meaningful work that Thomas is doing. To start instead from the position that exploring the complexities of personal belief is a healthy part of academic inquiry, as James would, we are positioned to focus on portions of the text that may otherwise seem unimportant, ask questions that might in some contexts seem irrelevant, and make suggestions that may for some run counter to our normal habits of response. To adopt a Jamesian pragmatic stance when responding to essays like Thomas's entails from the start that we "account more successfully for the ways we actually read and react" to students' accounts (Newkirk 6). For, as Thomas Newkirk suggests in *The Performance of Self in Student Writing,* by identifying the tacit agenda that shapes judgments of religious students' work and by "[r]eading against the grain of our own . . . preferences," we will be better equipped to "imagine a context in which it can be significant and meaningful—even admirable" (10).

From a Jamesian pragmatic perspective, there is much to admire in Thomas's essay. That Thomas is describing a series of experiences that have led him to devote nearly twenty hours a week to on-campus ministry and commit his life to the Christian pulpit is highly significant because it indicates that Thomas's beliefs are, in a pragmatic sense, true. James states: "Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process: the process namely of verifying itself" ("Pragmatism's Conception"114). Put otherwise, "to develop a thought's meaning we need only to determine what conduct it is fitted to produce" ("What Pragmatism Means" 94), for it is in this tracing of practical consequences that the "cash value" of one's beliefs is verified or disproved. The fact that the experiences that Thomas is conveying in his essay have become "rules for action" in his life make them, pragmatically speaking, a meaningful reality (94).

To pay close attention to the ways that Thomas is attempting to work out the reality of his personal beliefs and religious commitments in writing is significant, because his text provides a fragmentary view of how this student of faith is negotiating the contradictions, complexities, and mysteries of his experiences among a variety of competing belief systems. Thomas is not using these biblical texts dogmatically, but dialogically. In making meaning of these texts through his experience and grappling with his experiences through the language of these texts, Thomas is engaging in the kind of sophisticated praxis that is often sought after in academic writing. There is a generative dialogue created in the essay between the experiences Thomas constructs and the biblical texts he cites that is consistent with the "they say/I say" structure taught in many undergraduate writing contexts (see, for example, Graff and Birkenstein). In this case, however, the conversation is not among the writer's viewpoint and the viewpoints offered by other written texts, but among the writer's life experience as text and a series of biblical texts. The cycle of action, reflection, and invention through which Thomas is working in this essay is certainly impressive in this respect.

The form Thomas chooses to use for his essay is also interesting, because in many respects it departs from the genre conventions of a traditional essay. Since he was working to convey the fluctuating nature of his beliefs over time, Thomas felt that the structure of the traditional essay was not suitable for his purposes. He opted, therefore, to use a journal/letter format—a structure that has been adopted by influential Christian apologists to do similar kinds of work. C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* is one example. That Thomas selected this structure from a range of others is significant, because it indicates that he is not simply rehearsing established forms to regurgitate clichéd ideas. He is drawing on a form successfully used in texts with similar purposes to explore new territory, and in doing so, he demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of genre and a high level of creativity.

In addition to these observations, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of the project in which Thomas engages. As Augustine remarks in Book 1, Chapter 6 of *On Christian Doctrine*, the rhetor who attempts to convey the sacred through language is treading on thorny ground:

> Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wish to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable? If I said what were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is

> created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. The contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally. (10–11)

James also points to the difficulty of such an undertaking in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Though understanding the difficultly of the project, Thomas was determined to go forward, because he saw it as an opportunity to prepare for his future writing as a pastor. He expressed that to be successful as a pastor, he knew he would need to be able to talk about the consequences of his Christian faith in his daily experiences, and he wanted to use this writing assignment as a way to explore that dynamic. By connecting his experiences to biblical texts through the process of self-reflection and the act of writing, Thomas sought to better understand his own identity in relation to his faith tradition. In the words of the apostle Paul, he saw this project as an opportunity to "work out his salvation" and share the significance of the insights he gained with others. In fact, during the semester he was enrolled in honors first-year writing, he used parts of the essay to give talks at his former high school and at a church in his hometown. From a Deweyan perspective, such an experience would be deemed "educative" because it is inspiring future learning and inquiry. In asking questions such as Who am I? Who am I going to be? What is my calling? Is it worthy? and How could I ever know? Thomas is initiating the kind of lifelong process of inquiry that higher education aims to inspire. These are the kinds of important questions with which many of us hope students will grapple as they negotiate the challenges of their undergraduate years and beyond. And for Thomas, his faith tradition is an important catalyst for this rich exploration. Without an opportunity for inquiry of this kind, such questions may remain mere abstractions for a student like Thomas.

Beyond what the essay is already doing well, there are many places in the text that could provide rich starting points for revision. Thomas's entry discussing the Holy Spirit's presence in worship and God's revelation to him during the two hours he spent in silence at camp is, in my view, one of those places. This entry—unlike the others in his essay—alludes to mystical experiences that had a profound impact on Thomas. Here Thomas uses figurative language to attempt to convey these experiences to readers: "The profound feeling of the presence of the Holy Spirit is a weight and a heat that surrounds you and fills your lungs with every breath, as if the air were somehow thicker. Yet it is comforting, like the warm embrace of a parent." In using the metaphors of "weight" and "heat" and comparing this spiritual experience to the "warm embrace of a

parent," Thomas tries to tap senses and experiences that he expects might be familiar to readers. He is clearly working here to invent language that might help an audience unfamiliar with experiences of the kind he is describing relate in some way to these important moments.

While I would argue that the strategy he uses here is to some extent rhetorically effective for his purpose, there is room for improvement. As they stand, his discussions of these experiences may still feel too abstract for readers who have not shared similar encounters. To help this student relate these experiences to readers more effectively, a curious reader could be an ally. Approaching this segment with the kind of wonderment that James displayed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* that is, might aid Thomas in communicating the magnificence of these experiences to his audience. In this spirit, the reader might ask: What senses were activated in the Holy Spirit's presence? What did you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel? What happens to your body in moments like those described here? Have you experienced similar sensations in other contexts? What are the experiences you describe here analogous to? How do you discriminate the Spirit's presence? Have you had other experiences of this kind? If so, what were they like? How have such experiences impacted your beliefs in the past? What allows you to know when the Spirit is present? How do these experiences compare with or differ from the religious experiences of others you have talked with or read about?

The segments conveying Thomas's feelings of spiritual emptiness would also be of interest for getting at the other side of the same believing coin. Encouraging Thomas to express the feeling of the Holy Spirit's absence or God's distance might also be a way to assist this writer in his attempts to convey the shift in his interior condition to his audience. As in the case of the segment above, a reader might inquire: What senses were activated in the Spirit's absence? What happens to your body in moments of such distance? Have you experienced similar sensations in other contexts? Are the experiences you describe here analogous to other experiences? How do you discriminate the Spirit's absence? Have you had other experiences of this kind? If so, what were they like? How have such experiences impacted your beliefs in the past? What allows you to know when the Spirit is removed from you? Such questions could aid this student in further developing the language resources to communicate the complex, multifaceted process of belief formation. They might better allow Thomas to more vividly represent the fluctuation among the various forms of belief he is attempting to articulate in his essay.

Such questions also might allow Thomas to draw more effectively upon the rhetorical resources of narrative writing—concrete detail, vivid description, and figurative language—to ground his experiences in a way that is accessible to readers. This means inventing language resources that will provide the audience with an opportunity to connect to the sacred moments he is attempting to place before them. As C. S. Lewis notes in "The Language of Religion," such experiences are best expressed in the realm of the poetic: "The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by hints, similes, metaphors" (186). It is, thus, to this realm of discourse that we might look in the future to help religious students more effectively articulate their beliefs, commitments, and experiences.

Related to this, in our efforts to help students like Thomas develop vocabularies that will allow them to effectively draw upon their faith commitments in academic writing and gain a serious hearing with diverse audiences, we might also suggest examples of rhetoric in which writers have effectively drawn upon their religious traditions to meet the demands of their particular situations. Example speeches like those found in Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon's recent collection, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*, for instance, could provide religious students with models of rhetorical practice in which religious discourse refigured public discourse and policy. Likewise, suggesting that students of faith read the writing of such scholars in our discipline as Walter Ong, Wayne Booth, Ann Ruggles Gere, and Chris Anderson could provide opportunities to see the ways in which vocabularies of faith can productively inform scholarly work. Along these same lines, theologians like Augustine, Martin Buber, Shusaku Endo, and David Tracy have the potential to provide religious students with vocabularies that they might draw from and study in their efforts to link their religious faith and their academic writing.

Alongside such suggestions, an adjustment in the ways that we encourage students of faith to write about their religious experiences might also be helpful. Through my experience with Thomas, I came to realize the ways that a pragmatic approach might have better utilized Thomas's religious faith to inspire effective rhetorical practice. As I note above, James suggests that the purpose of inquiry is to "bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience" ("What Pragmatism Means" 97). That said, an approach I might have taken is to have asked Thomas to select a key term or concept in his essay (e.g., identity, surrender, will) and (re)construct his experiences in such a way that readers might understand how the "cash-

value" of that term has been set at work within his stream of experience. An example of this kind of work can be found in Kathleen Norris's *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*—a collection of essays in which Norris uses her lived experience to come to terms with the religious vocabulary of her faith tradition.

Occasions for this kind of exploration might be productive, because they encourage students of faith to explore their deeply held values and beliefs in light of their experiences in an effort to make them available to others. Rather than requiring that students like Thomas provide a rationale for their beliefs, rhetorical work of this kind asks students to mine their "God-terms" and reflect on *defining* events in their lives in order to communicate them to an audience in writing (Burke, *Rhetoric* 333). To do so, students must connect their experiences to the terms that order their lives in a way that is meaningful to diverse audiences. In inventing language that attempts to *set forth* these transitions, students are exploring why they believe what they believe, developing rhetorical resources that might allow them to construct themselves as they desire, and bringing values and beliefs to the attention of their classmates that might otherwise remain latent. In this way, James's pragmatic method might help compositionists both value and utilize the experiences and commitments that students like Thomas bring to the writing classroom

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Closing Thoughts

This essay starts from the premise that "faith-informed scholarship" is legitimate in the mainstream academy and attempts to suggest a few ways in which it might be cultivated in composition teaching (Marsden 10). Following Kristine Hansen, I believe that "writing teachers must come to grips with students' desire—indeed, their right—to express their religious views in the writing classroom" (25). And with Hansen, I am persuaded that composition specialists "should make every reasonable effort to work with students of any political and religious or nonreligious persuasion to help them develop their rhetorical powers, even when the teacher personally dislikes some or all of the beliefs those students espouse" (32). As Rand and others have shown, religion is, for many students, a way of making sense of the world and a central facet

of their human experience. Given this fact, it is important for instructors to develop an understanding of how religious students' commitments inform their work. By approaching religious students' texts with this kind of openness, it is probable that instructors will learn more than is currently known about these students' notions of "good writing," ideas about audience, assumptions about language, conceptions of texts, views on reading, and so forth. To this point, much of what has been written in this area of inquiry has relied on preconceived ideas about how "fundamentalist Christians" view the Bible, truth, and so on. This literature has not, however, seriously investigated individual students' perceptions on these matters. Narratives of this kind tend to start with a description of how religious students think about language and texts, based on definitions generated in religious studies or elsewhere, and move to an illustration of student texts that fit those definitions. Such research, in my view, is limited, because it works from generalizations that do not account for the complex notions about texts and language that many religious students have.

For James, individuals' belief systems are never simply a mirror of the institutions—religious or otherwise—with which they align themselves. Instead, they are always a complex web of viewpoints in the process of becoming something different. It is a mistake, therefore, to rely on preconceived understandings of the "official" beliefs of religious institutions in making judgments about individuals' beliefs. In order to do justice to the experiential component of people's lives, James knew that he must attend closely to the experiences of each individual believer. Like James, we would do well to respectfully consider the contents and motivations of our students' individual beliefs, as expressed in their writing. By approaching students—and their texts—with the kind of respect and openness that James demonstrates in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, we might seek to understand how they as individuals conceive of their relationship to the sacred. Rather than making assumptions based on the institutions with which students are affiliated, it would be beneficial to converse with such students about specific texts that they have produced in an effort to learn about their motivations for selecting particular rhetorical recourses. For as Bizzell notes, "if we want to see the whole beast, we should be welcoming, not resisting, the advent of diverse forms of academic discourse,

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and encouraging our students to bring all of their discursive resources to bear on the intellectual challenges of the academic disciplines" ("Intellectual" 9). If we are truly committed to the ideal of pluralism, a willingness to attend closely to the rich discursive resources through which students convey their religious convictions, I believe, must be a "living option" for researchers and teachers in our discipline (James, "Will" 70).

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Notes

1. See, for example, Anderson; Barrett; Berthoff et al.; Shannon Carter; Bizzell; Dively; Gere; Goodburn; Perkins; Rand; Ringer; Thomson-Bunn; Vander Lei and kyburz.

2. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's 2007 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, "more than nine-in-ten Americans (92%) believe in the existence of God or a universal spirit."

3. As Rodney Stark notes in *What Americans Really Believe*, "Religious and mystical experiences are the overlooked aspect of our national religious life—neglected by researchers and ignored or even denied by leading theologians and seminary professors. Yet, these experiences are so intrinsic to American religion that two out of every three respondents reported having at least one of those experiences asked about in the 2007 Baylor survey, and 45 percent report having two or more" (59).

4. Thomas is a pseudonym for the student cited in this article. It should also be noted that Thomas gave consent to cite and publish his writing in this article.

5. Though I have chosen to focus on the ways that Thomas effectively draws upon his religious commitments while working in the genre of personal narrative, I do not mean to suggest that such work is restricted to this genre. Rather, it is my position that this kind of rhetorical inquiry could be valuable to students of faith in a range of writing situations.

6. The New International Version of 2 Corinthians 4:8-12 reads: "[8]We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; [9]persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. [10]We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. [11]For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. [12]So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you."

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