

Theological Minimalism and Maximalism: On the Contributions of a Theology Grounded on Experience

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English Abstract

The paper develops an interpretation of the pragmatic and religious investigations of William James (1842-1910), particularly in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (VRE), through some elements of the theological method of Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928) in order to examine to what extent the dialogue of both authors constitutes a contribution to contemporary theological discussion. In that sense, this essay supports the hypothesis that the general common emphasis of both authors on the experience and the mutual awareness of theological reflection as the exercise of understanding the embodied faith, requires a theoretical and inseparably existential approach in order to make a valuable contribution to the secular context of the theology of our time. In that frame, I maintain that VRE supposes a complex exercise articulation of two complementary ways of studying the religious phenomenon: a minimalist approach (an exercise of abstraction from the incarnated nature of the experience of faith) and a maximalist approach (which, rather, examines the experience of faith in all its density, in all its cultural, economic, political dimensions, etc.), the same that allow us, as we shall see, a more appropriate analysis of the religious beliefs according to the contexts in which we are situated. The essay finalizes by indicating how the theology of Gutierrez could be interpreted as a part of this dual strategy of reasoning, arguing that the Peruvian theologian develops a process of orthodox secularization of theology that permits both a more abstract, convener and open discourse and a true work of deepening the Gospel's message and the tradition of the Church.

Key words: William James, Gustavo Gutiérrez, pragmatism, theology, experience.

Resumen en español

El artículo plantea una interpretación de las investigaciones religiosas de William James (1842-1910), particularmente en *Las variedades de la experiencia religiosa* (VRE), a través de algunos elementos del método teológico de Gustavo Gutiérrez con el objetivo de examinar en qué medida el diálogo entre ambos pensadores constituye una contribución a la discusión teológica contemporánea. En ese sentido, este trabajo defiende la hipótesis de que el énfasis de ambos autores en la experiencia y la consciencia mutua de que la reflexión teológica consiste en un ejercicio de inteligencia de la fe, requiere de una aproximación indeliblemente teórica y existencial para poder hacer una real contribución al contexto secular de la teología de nuestro tiempo. En ese marco, se sostiene que VRE supone un complejo ejercicio de articulación de dos aproximaciones complementarios para el estudio del fenómeno

religioso: una minimalista (un ejercicio de abstracción respecto de la naturaleza encarnada de la experiencia de fe) y una maximalista (que, en cambio, examina la experiencia de fe en toda su densidad trascendente, cultural, económica, política, etc.). Este ejercicio de articulación nos permite un modo de análisis más apropiado de las creencias religiosas de acuerdo a los contextos en los cuales nos encontremos. El artículo termina indicando cómo la teología de Gutiérrez puede ser interpretada como parte de esta estrategia doble de razonamiento, afirmando que el teólogo peruano desarrolla un proceso de secularización ortodoxa de la teología que le permite tanto un lenguaje más abstracto y convocante, como uno que verdaderamente profundice en el mensaje del Evangelio y en la tradición de la Iglesia.

Palabras clave: William James, Gustavo Gutiérrez, pragmatismo, teología, experiencia.

Resumo em português

Este artigo propõe uma interpretação das investigações religiosas de William James (1842-1910), particularmente em *Variedades de Experiência Religiosa* (VRE), usando alguns elementos do método teológico de Gustavo Gutiérrez com o objetivo examinar em que medida o diálogo entre ambos os pensadores constitui uma contribuição à discussão teológica contemporânea. Nesse sentido, este trabalho defende a hipótese de que a ênfase dos dois autores na experiência – bem como a consciência partilhada por ambos de que a reflexão teológica consiste em um exercício de inteligência da fé – requer uma abordagem ao mesmo tempo teórica e existencial, para que seja possível uma real contribuição ao contexto secular da teologia de nosso tempo. Nesses termos, sustenta-se que VRE supõe um complexo exercício de articulação de duas abordagens complementares para o estudo do fenômeno religioso: uma minimalista (um exercício de abstração relativamente à natureza encarnada da experiência de fé) e uma maximalista (que, por sua vez, examina a experiência de fé em toda sua densidade transcendente, cultural, econômica, política etc.). Este exercício de articulação nos permite um modo de análise mais apropriado das crenças religiosas, em conformidade com os contextos em que nos encontremos. O artigo termina indicando como a teologia de Gutiérrez pode ser interpretada como parte dessa dupla estratégia de raciocínio, afirmando que o teólogo peruano desenvolve um processo de secularização ortodoxa da teologia, o qual lhe permite tanto uma linguagem mais abstrata e convocatória, quanto uma linguagem que verdadeiramente aprofunde a mensagem do Evangelho e a tradição da Igreja.

Palavras-chave: William James, Gustavo Gutiérrez, pragmatismo, teologia, experiência.

In the following lines I propose to the reader a strategy that allows us to examine theology in a renewed way by means of the establishment of some central connections between the writings of William James (1842-1910) and Gustavo Gutiérrez O. P. (1928). For this purpose, I first want to show in section 1 how Gutiérrez conceives the theological

work, emphasizing the consequences that can be derived from the author's conceptual shift according to which theology is comprehended as the understanding of the faith, i.e., as a reflection whose starting and returning point is the believer's experience of faith. In the second section of the essay I want to revise how James conceived the philosophical enterprise, showing the novelty of his Pragmatism and its structural similarities, especially regarding the role of experience for theoretical reflection, to Gutiérrez's thesis presented in section 1. After raising the central parallels between the ideas of both thinkers, in the final sections I point out their relevance to contemporary theology. In section 3 I synthetically show that James developed a dual but integrated strategy to examine religious phenomenon: a minimalist approach that is an exercise of abstraction from the embodied nature of the experience of faith that focuses on its core elements, those more capable of reaching consensus and less dependent on a particular religious denomination, and a maximalist approach that instead examines the experience of faith in all its density, in all its cultural, economic, and political dimensions the same approach that allows, as we shall see, a more appropriate analysis of the religious beliefs according to the contexts in which we are situated. The essay ends (section 4) by indicating how the theology of Gutiérrez could be interpreted as a part of this dual strategy of reasoning, arguing that the Peruvian theologian develops a process of orthodox secularization of theology that permits both a convener and open discourse and a true work of deepening the Gospel's message and the tradition of the Church.

Section 1

Near the beginning of his famous *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez says something that I believe is crucial:

Theological reflection —that is, the *understanding of the faith*— arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all those who have accepted the gift of the Word of God. Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking to be authentic and complete and is, therefore, essential to the common consideration of this faith in the ecclesial community. There is present in *all believers* —and more so in every Christian community— a rough outline of theology. There is present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is *manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude*. It is on this foundation, and only because of it, that the edifice of theology —in the precise and technical sense of the term— can be erected. *This foundation is not merely a jumping-off point, but the soil into which theological reflection stubbornly and permanently sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength.*[1]

I want to begin with the lines just quoted to propose an interpretation that I believe could shed light on James's Pragmatic reflection about religion and, at the same time, on the value of the methodological approach of Gutiérrez's liberation theology. The first feature that I find worthy of consideration is that Gutiérrez, in a very novel conceptual movement, prefers to speak of theology as the *understanding of the faith*. This suggestion is entirely relevant if we direct our attention to James's Pragmatic approach to religion that, insofar as it is suspicious of metaphysics, has always preferred the

personal experience of the believer. In any case, what interests me here is to note that the Peruvian theologian is very emphatic, not only in this brief passage but throughout his work, in saying that there is no genuine theological reflection if it is not rooted in life, in action (gesture in the Spanish original), in concrete attitude. It is not merely a chronological beginning for research: it is the *starting point of experience* as a condition of possibility of any further consideration.

Although not a specialist in classical Pragmatism,[2] Gutiérrez's theological insight has led him very close to positions such as those of William James and John Dewey regarding philosophical reflection. I am not saying here that they have equal projects; nevertheless, I can identify some similar structural features that we must consider. If we refine our sight, for example, we may have already noticed that the last part of Gutiérrez's quotation recalls the Jamesian emphasis on the role of experience in the constitution of any theoretical framework.[3] This is what Gregory Pappas calls "the meta-philosophy of the classical pragmatists." [4] Pappas quotes Douglas Browning:

Understanding John Dewey's comprehensive and, in its details, dauntingly complex philosophy requires taking account of his view of the three essential phases of the experience, namely, (1) *the starting point in everyday experience* of all our attempts to enhance the meaning of our lives, (2) the process of the experimental transformation of such experience and (3) the experience of consummatory achievement. ...the first phase has been too often neglected. This is unfortunate, since Dewey's notion of experience, which is the key to grasping the import of each of the phases, is initially shaped at the starting point and carried forward from it.[5]

I think that this passage by itself shows the centrality of these phases, but is particularly the first point that most concerns us. In that sense, I believe it is a valuable contribution to consider the matter in the same terms when we are talking about William James and, by extension, of the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez. To evade the value of the starting point of experience as a condition for any further theoretical development in James or Gutiérrez implies a mutilation of the novelty of the thought of any of these authors. In that sense, Pappas's admonition regarding the minimal attention paid by neo-Pragmatists to the metaphilosophical level of reflection becomes very relevant. In the case of John Dewey, the philosopher that Pappas studies, the question becomes clear when we examine some misguided readings precisely because they pass over the "starting point of experience." [6]

In any case, what I want to stress now is that in the three mentioned authors the specific experience plays a fundamental role and is the inescapable condition for reflection. Like Dewey, Gutiérrez refers to it as the starting point. Similarly, both the Peruvian theologian and William James mention the notion of an attitude when making reference to speculation. Gutiérrez understood it as the *concrete attitude*, the experience of life we could say, which is the source of the understanding of the faith; the philosopher speaks of a *philosophical attitude* or *temper of mind* that is directed to the specific experience as the ground for reflection.[7]

Let us go back to Gutiérrez to delve into the issues we have just presented. The basic idea of liberation theology, as this author maintains, is to "reconsider the 'practice' of the church in today's world." [8] In the introduction to the work we have quoted, the author elaborates on this point:

This book is an attempt at reflection, based on the gospel and the *experiences of men and women* committed to the process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a *theological reflection born of the experience* of shared efforts to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human. Many in Latin America have started along the path of a commitment to liberation, and among them is a growing number of Christians; *whatever the validity of these pages, it is due to their experiences and reflections*. My greatest desire is *not to betray their experiences and efforts* to elucidate the meaning of their solidarity with the oppressed. [9]

The theological work that this thinker is proposing is not intended to be anything but a theoretical elaboration whose source is the life experiences of individual men and women engaged in the process of what he calls *liberation*. [10] I do not intend to investigate here the depths of Gutiérrez's proper theological developments in the technical sense, but I would like to show how, from a different research perspective, this theologian was aware of something that was also constantly on the horizon of James and also of Dewey: the idea that reflection comes from life and it must return to it. If this was not possible, James believed, we would be faced with vain and unnecessary intellectual disputes. [11]

In the same vein but from a Christian perspective, Gutiérrez also speaks of theology as a *critical reflection on praxis*. Our author thus identifies a number of items that reinforce this theological conception: A) The rediscovery of the centrality of charity in the Christian life: "faith works through charity" [12] and hence the "understanding of the faith appears as the understanding not of a simple affirmation —almost memorization— of truths, but of a *commitment, an overall attitude, a particular posture towards life*." [13] B) The significant evolution of spirituality, in which contemplation and action are no longer opposed notions and in which we can speak more precisely of a *contemplation in action*. C) An increased sensitivity to anthropological aspects of revelation: "the Word about God is at the same time a *promise to the world*." The point rests on never forgetting that "the God of the Christian revelation is a *God incarnate*" (*made man* in the Spanish original). [14] And, Gutiérrez explains, it is not about a horizontalism or a mere mundaneness but "is simply a question of the rediscovery of the indissoluble unity of humankind and God." [15] D) Furthermore, "*the very life of the church*" [16] appears ever more clearly, as a *locus theologicus*. [17] In that sense, Gutiérrez quotes M. D. Chenu: "They are poor theologians who wrapped up in their manuscripts and scholastic disputations, are not open to these amazing events [referring to the commitment in social movements], *not only in the pious fervor of their hearts, but formally in their science*; there is theological datum and an extremely fruitful one, in the *presence of the Spirit*." [18]

This is an all-important precision. The feeling of spiritual closeness to the church praxis is not enough for the theologian; he is required to incorporate that praxis into the rigor of theological exploration.[19] The duty of the Church as an institution and of the magisterium is living "the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of persons in this age." [20] In the same strain, and mainly after the impulse of Vatican II, [21] E) we can speak more properly of a theology of the *signs of the times*. Thus it is not just an intellectual exercise, but a call to *concrete pastoral service to others*. F) Philosophy has also taken place in this process with the *emphasis on human action as a point of departure for any reflection*. Gutiérrez thinks about Blondel, us, probably, about William James. G) Perhaps in this same area, the theologian mentions the fundamental role of Marxist thought at the time, and the centrality of the *transformative praxis of the world* in Marxism. As we know, this was one of the topics that generated more suspicion on the most conservative wing of the Church. [22] Finally, H) the rediscovery of eschatology made theological reflection focus more attention on the *historical praxis*: [23]

'To do the truth,' as the Gospel says, thus acquires a precise and concrete meaning in terms of the importance of action in Christian life. Faith in a God who loves us and calls us to the gift of full communion with God and fellowship with others not only is not foreign to the transformation of the world; it leads necessarily to the building up of that fellowship and communion in history. Moreover, only by doing this truth will our faith be "verified" (*verificará* in the Spanish original), in the etymological sense of the word. From this notion has recently been derived the term *orthopraxis*, which still disturbs the sensitivities of some. The intention, however, is not to deny the meaning of *orthodoxy*, understood as a proclamation of and a reflection on statements considered true. Rather, the goal is to balance and even reject the primacy and almost exclusiveness that doctrine has enjoyed in Christian life and above all to modify the emphasis, often obsessive, upon the attainment of an orthodoxy that is often nothing more than a fidelity to an obsolete tradition or a debatable interpretation. In a more positive vein, the intention is to recognize the work and importance of concrete behavior, of deeds, of action, of praxis in the Christian life. [24]

Section 2

Considering the observations developed to this point, there are two ideas that are worth highlighting from the quoted lines, ideas that allow us to establish some parallels with the work of James. Regardless of the precise content, Gutiérrez is particularly close to the deeper motivations of classical Pragmatism: concrete behavior, action, praxis. With this I do not intend to deny the value of theoretical reflection; in fact, no Pragmatist would do so. [25] That would be naive or a rhetorical turn full of Romanticism. What is denied is the primacy or even the exclusivity of the theoretical approach.

The other point I would like to distinguish is the similarity between the notion of truth handled by Gutiérrez and that postulated by William James. Again, I speak of general similarities, I do not pretend to hold a conceptual identity. For James the

question rests on our approach to the problem of truth. James argues that the intellectualist side of the conflict declares "that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you've got your true idea of anything, there's an end of the matter. You're in possession; you *know*; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny." [26] As is clear, James is objecting to the idea that there is the possibility of a truth conceived as a fixed possession. This is particularly important because from it you can derive disastrous practical consequences, moreover, in the case of religion: it limits the free experience of the believer's option, turning it into a mechanical exercise of security and certainty acquisition. [27] That is why James immediately replies with this intellectualist version, postulating an outline of what his theory of truth means: "Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. 'Grant an idea or belief to be true,' it says, 'What concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value *in experiential terms*?' " [28]

The truth is connected to the problem of how it may affect the lives of human beings, what changes can lead us to accept that something is true and not false. In that vein, James argues something quite suggestive: "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. 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 its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*." [29] Let us go back to Gutiérrez. In the quoted passage, was he not talking about "doing the truth"? Did he not say that to make the truth is the way to verify our faith? Was that not why he was talking about orthopraxis? And, after that, what have we just examined in James? Precisely that ideas become true, that truth is verified in experience. Notice also that both Gutiérrez and James used a set of italics to indicate the Latin root of the word verification with the clear intention of emphasizing that truth is *made*. But it is not only about that; the connections become more explicit if one considers that James was also a religious thinker and a Pragmatist philosopher with a Christian background [30] who had learned to articulate his faith with a view of the world and philosophy, as we have been detailing. Thus, James could say something like "there is not one grace of the Spirit of God, of the existence of which, in any professor of religion, *Christian practice* is not the most decisive evidence. ... The degree in which our experience is productive of *practice* shows the degree in which our experience is spiritual and divine." [31]

The passage shows the application of Pragmatism to the realm of religion. The spiritual authenticity of religious experience is measured in terms of its impact in the field of the praxis of the believer. Not for nothing did C. S. Peirce, in a footnote to "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" and in allusion to his Pragmatism, mentioned one of the biblical passages that refers to the actions of every human being as the measure of the authenticity of their faith: "By their fruits we shall know them" (Matthew 7: 15-20). [32] Without doubt, James thinks in the same terms. I would also like to emphasize, as is evidenced by the quotation from Peirce, that the experience is deeply biblical. Faith, love, hope -- all these evangelical values are authentic only when they happen in the concrete life of the believer. The fruits given by the man of faith are those that testify to

the truth of his experience. It is in this context that James can say very clearly that “at bottom we are thrown back upon the general principles by which the empirical philosophy has always contended that we must be guided in our search for truth.”[33] In short, his conception of a genuine religious experience is strongly related to the notion of truth, which is one of the general principles that James holds: the primacy of practical consequences. Without fruit, there is no way to account for faith, a conception shared by both James and Gutiérrez.

Section 3

Having said that, however, there are still some issues to clarify, and they can take shape if we examine the title given to this essay. In my view, James’s entry to the problem of religion has two complementary sides, at least if we consider his most significant work in this regard, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. [34] The first and most developed consists of the evaluation of religious phenomenon in psychological-descriptive terms in order to establish patterns that allow us to understand the common core of that kind of phenomenon. Beyond the very specific details that I cannot explain here, the central point for the purposes of my argument is that James said that this common core was formed by the concrete experiences of life transformation (conversion and its variants), which were attributed to the intervention of an external entity (the divinity). In that sense, our author showed, through a pragmatic analysis of the experiences of faith of the religious geniuses, [35] that those experiences reveal a profound value and that their truth was made clear by positive practical consequences in the life of the believer. [36]

Nevertheless, this argumentative line is insufficient because it does not account for the density of the experience of faith, even when it shows its truth and legitimacy in Pragmatic terms. James was aware of this, and that is why, in the concluding section of the book, he indicates that this kind of approach was only intended to provide a sort of reasoning able to defend the legitimacy of faith from skeptical objections, like those presented by William Clifford, [37] that sought to declare faith to be an immoral and irresponsible practice. Then, after establishing the rational legitimacy of faith through the Pragmatic test of the positive consequences for human life, James took a further step by accepting the insufficiency of his analysis, [38] making it explicit that faith is a much more complex, dense, and embodied experience.

Perhaps the best way of expressing this is through some extracts from a letter sent to James by his friend John Jay Chapman. Chapman had previously written him to criticize the coldness with which James approached the study of religious experience, reducing it, according to Chapman, to a simple calculation of consequences. James answered in these terms:

Dear Chapman,

Pray continue your epistolary explosions. The latter one did my heart real good. You belong to the Salvation Army party; and the poor little razor-like "thin end of the wedge" which your academic personages twiddle between their fingers must indeed seem loathsome to the robuster temperaments at the other end. You remind me of the farmer who said to his bishop, after a sermon proving the existence of God, "It is a very fine sermon, but I believe there be a God after all."

Faith indeed! Damme if I call that faith, either. It is only calculated for the sickly hotbed atmosphere of the philosophic-positivistically enlightened scientific classroom. To the victims of spinal paralysis which these studies superinduce, the homeopathic treatment, although you might not believe it, really does good. We are getting too refined for anything; altogether out of touch with genuine life. Therefore I tie to you as a piece of water-closet paper might try to tie to a stone, if it were afraid that the wind would blow it away.

All this rubbish is only for public purposes. In my individual heart I fully believe my faith is as robust as yours. The trouble about your robust and full-bodied faiths, however, is, that they begin to cut each other's throats too soon, and for getting on in the world and establishing a *modus vivendi* these pestilential refinements and reasonablenesses and moderations have to creep in. I am sorry for your paragraph about your supposed connection between belief and conduct. It is by no means busted; on the contrary, it is one of the most tremendous forces in the world.[39]

As follows from the letter and the reading of the conclusions of *Varieties*, James used this strategy only for public purposes. His intention was to persuade the nonbeliever, at least, that persons of faith have a right to believe without accusing them of irrational and irresponsible behavior. Nonetheless, James was fully aware of the *strategic nature* of this approach, completely conscious of the alive, intense, historically and communally located character of our religious beliefs. Therefore I would like to discuss James as a philosopher who establishes a healthy duality for the understanding of the experience of faith—of theology, as defined by Gutierrez—a duality that is expressed through two different but complementary argumentative lines, the minimalist and the maximalist. In this context, when I refer to a theological minimalism I mean a kind of strategic approach posed to find minimum points of encounter, especially in the public sphere, among people who have a religious affiliation and those with a different one or simply with people who profess no creed. In that sense, to speak about the palpable dimension of faith, namely its practical positive consequences, is a propitious method because it evades the difficulties derived from the most particular religious elements of any confession, those which could be a barrier for the establishment of convergence points with the believer in another creed or with the nonbeliever. For instance, making things like the virginity of Mary, the infallibility of the Pope, the cultural developments of liturgy, the different conceptions of transcendence, the various sociopolitical interpretations of the Gospel, and so on the conditions of any agreement between religious persons (or between them and nonbelievers) would be almost impossible.[40] On the other hand, if religious people put all these very particular beliefs aside by a kind of *epoché*, they

could concentrate on their shared goals: peace, love, forgiveness, piety, and so on. In diverse ways, these are all very relevant values for the public sphere.

Notwithstanding the previous remarks, the experience of faith, as Michael Walzer argues for ethics, "is dense from the beginning, culturally integrated, fully significant, and only occasionally reveals itself as faint, when [theological] language is directed towards specific purposes."^[41] That dense, integrated, and fully significant character represents the maximalist dimension of faith. A reflection that focuses on this perspective is what I call a theological maximalism. What James proposes in *Varieties* are two ways of approaching the religious phenomenon whose virtue lies in the different aspects that they illuminate according to the needs required by the circumstances. This, as can be noticed, is especially important in contexts where a broad-based public consensus is required and in which the lack of a theological minimalist strategy could make the voice of men and women of faith irrelevant if they defend a tough dogmatism.^[42]

Section 4

Having said all this, we still have a pending task: to place the theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez in this argumentative context. My thesis is that Gutiérrez's theological reflection supports both a minimalist and a maximalist reading, and therefore has a fundamental importance to contemporary theological discussion. While in the context of the ideas stated above the theology of Gutiérrez is clearly a maximalist exercise of reflection—located in the sociopolitical context of Latin America and shaped by the experience of the suffering poor of Jesus Christ—I claim at the same time that this work allows a minimalist approach.

In my opinion, what operates in the work of Gutiérrez is what I call an *orthodox secularization of theology*. I am referring to the conceptual shift from theory to practice developed by the Peruvian theologian, emphasizing the fact that theology must be understood as an exercise of understanding of the faith, i.e., the study of how faith in Jesus Christ is lived, especially by men and women who suffer injustice. I have called this movement *secular* because it shifts the emphasis that previous theology placed on metaphysics, the famous ontotheology of Martin Heidegger, to the realm of human experience, the *saeculum*.

The theological process behind this change is represented by the movement from what philosophers called the God of metaphysics to the God who became man and dwelt among us, the God of the Gospel. This is precisely what allows me to talk about an orthodox secularization of theology because Gutiérrez does not break with the theological tradition^[43] that precedes him^[44] yet he renews it from inside, retrieving the strength of the phenomenon of the incarnation and the relevance of the role of the Son of Man in the liberation of the human being. This is something clearly stated by the deeds of Jesus narrated in the Gospel, actions that show, without any doubt, the preferential option for the poor made by the Savior, a preferential option that is, as the

Pope remembered in Aparecida,[45] the most characteristic note of the Latin American church.

The interesting thing is that in developing this orthodox movement of secularization, Gutiérrez poses a finely articulated project that allows him to convene around his theological discourse actors who do not share the Christian revelation, but do share the same preoccupation with the injustice denounced by liberation theology, the sensibility for the unjustified misery of the poor. Thus the Peruvian theologian is able to maintain a significant balance that allows him, within a Catholic orthodox maximalism, to have a minimalist matrix that gives the project an enviable openness and convening power.

To sum up, I argue that the beginning of a dialogue between the reflections of James and Gutiérrez could be very helpful to contemporary theological discussion, particularly if one accepts the central role that both authors give to praxis, to experience as the starting point of theological reflection. For his part, James, according to my interpretation, provides a framework that helps us develop argumentative discourse strategies that illuminate different dimensions of religious phenomenon, namely those that allow the search for a common ground between believers and nonbelievers (theological minimalism) and those that reveal the dense and incarnated character of the experience of faith (theological maximalism). This is very suggestive because, from this context, it is possible to comprehend Gutiérrez's theology with new eyes: we can see in it a fine job of articulating both theological strategies. Thus Gutiérrez displays a maximalist theological strategy that permits a minimalist reading due to his practical emphasis on experience, the same manifested in the project of integral liberation of the human being. While the Peruvian theologian is very emphatic in stating that liberation presents three complementary dimensions,[46] the fact is that the commitment to the project, at least in its first two levels of the sociopolitical and the psychological-personal, does not depend on faith in Christian revelation. Hence, for example, someone like José María Arguedas,[47] whose centenary was celebrated in the present year, was very close to the motivations of liberation theology through his entire life and more clearly at the end of his life due to his friendship with Gutiérrez, despite his confessed atheism. [48] Because of this, I believe that the work of Gutiérrez and his methodological considerations, particularly those related to the theological task, articulates this double way of strategic analysis of religious phenomenon proposed by James. I therefore maintain that liberation theology is an entirely alive and instructive reflection, despite his four decades of intellectual and pastoral work.

Let me conclude by saying that I believe that the task of exploring the thought of Gustavo Gutiérrez, undoubtedly one of the most important theologians of recent history, is still pending, especially in regard to Peruvian scholars. We must enter in dialogue with his ideas with a creative and innovative spirit, putting his theology in conversation with new currents of thought, following the guidelines provided by Gutiérrez himself in his first writings. We must retrieve Gutiérrez's work in order to be able to derive new questions, new problems, and certainly some paths to answers from the richness of his

ideas. Putting his writings in relation to those of James has been a modest attempt to be a part of that renewed study spirit. My hope is that this work will continue in order to think more deeply about the density of our present but, even more importantly, to *live* deeply the density of our present, trying to change the destiny of those innocents who suffer unjustly.

Notes

[1] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (TL hereafter), revised edition with a new introduction (New York: Orbis, 2001), 3, emphasis added.

[2] Gutiérrez read James during his studies of psychology in Europe, but as he told me, he never made a profound exploration of his writings. However, after reading a draft of the present essay, he feels that some resemblances can be justly established.

[3] On this issue see E. Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982), for instance pp. 1-3.

[4] This was also the title of one of his presentations in the context of his lectures "Validity and Current Relevance of Classical Pragmatism" given in the Auditorium of Humanities at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú from May 25 to May 26, 2009. I want to thank Goyo Pappas for his kindness and interest in providing me with some guidelines for a better understanding of this problem. Reading his recent book on the ethics of John Dewey is probably the best way to do so.

[5] D. Browning, "Understanding Dewey: Starting at the Starting Point" (paper presented at the XIV Congreso Interamericano de Filosofía, Puebla, México, August 19, 1999), quoted in G. Pappas, *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 11-12.

[6] See the important nineteenth footnote to the introduction of Pappas's *John Dewey's Ethics*, *ibid.*

[7] These expressions appear in the context of James's preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, London, and Bombay: Longmans Green and Co., 1897). James refers to this "philosophical attitude" when talking about his notion of radical empiricism. I am not planning to examine here the problems that the doctrine of radical empiricism posed to the whole of James's work, which is a very specialized debate inappropriate to my approach in this paper. For a couple of rigorous reflections on this issue, see D. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and the introduction of J. McDermott, *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[8] Gutiérrez, *TL*, xv. It may be useful to make a clarification to avoid allegations that may already be emerging in the reader. Gutiérrez's work is clearly moving in the context of Catholic theology. Gutiérrez is a Catholic priest and, above all, a man of the Church. In that sense, his references and disquisitions always take place in such an

intellectual context and faith. The case of William James is quite different; however, the specific conditions of the theology of the Peruvian thinker do not pose a barrier to binding it with James's most important ideas about religion, as we shall see at the end of this essay.

[9] Gutiérrez, *TL*, xiii, emphasis added.

[10] The more summarized details about the concept are the following: "*Liberation* expresses the aspirations of oppressed people and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes. ... At a deeper level, *liberation* can be applied to an understanding of history. Humankind assumes conscious responsibility for its own destiny. ... The gradual conquest of true freedom leads to the creation of a new human kind and a qualitatively different society. ... Finally, ... *liberation* allows for another approach leading to the Biblical sources which inspire the presence and action of humankind in history. In the Bible, Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression. ... This is not a matter of three parallel or chronological successive processes, however. There are three levels of meaning of a single, complex process, which finds its deepest sense and its full realization in the saving work of Christ" (Gutiérrez, *TL*, 24-25).

[11] W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking. Popular Lectures on Philosophy* (Toronto, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922), 45-46.

[12] Gutiérrez, *TL*, 6.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] By the way, "church" does not have a capital "C" in the original Spanish version. The idea is to show that the attention of liberation theology is primarily directed to the ecclesial communities, to those men and women of faith, rather than the hierarchical institution. As we shall see, this is another good point of contact—not identity—with James. See James's own definition of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study on Human Nature, Centenary Edition* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), particularly the second chapter, "Circumscription of the Topic," 26-45.

[17] Gutiérrez, *TL*, 6.

[18] Gutiérrez, *TL*, 7, emphasis added. The quote corresponds to "La théologie au Saulchoir" (1937) in *La parole de Dieu I. La foi dans l'intelligence* (Paris: Du Cerf, 1964), 259. Notice also that the example used by James at the beginning of his second lecture in *Pragmatism* is a scholastic dispute about the nature of a squirrel (James, *Pragmatism*, 43-44).

[19] An interesting analysis from the side of fundamental theology about the role of praxis in Gutiérrez's theology can be found in two of the most important works of David Tracy: *Blessed the Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1975]), chapter 10, and *The Analogical*

Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chapter 2.

[20] *Gaudium et Spes* 1, quoted in Gutiérrez, TL, 7.

[21] For a significant inquiry of the relevance of Vatican II in Gutiérrez's theology, see G. Martínez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York, London: Continuum, 2001), 89-110, for instance.

[22] In this regard, the reader should examine G. Gutiérrez, "La verdad los hará libres," in G. Gutiérrez, *La verdad los hará libres. Confrontaciones* (Lima: CEP-IBC, 2005). In that essay (1986), Gutiérrez discusses the critical texts that appeared during the more than ten years after the publication of *A Theology of Liberation* (originally published in 1971). In particular, Gutiérrez focuses on two texts published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was in charge of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI: "Sobre algunos aspectos de la teología de la liberación" and "Libertad cristiana y liberación."

[23] The italics on the eight points mentioned by Gutiérrez have been added to emphasize the role of concrete human experience in the understanding of the faith.

[24] Gutiérrez, TL, 8. Although accepting that, Gutiérrez clarifies in a footnote to this passage: "Nowadays the same need of maintaining a balance requires that we criticize no less sharply the tendency to a quasi-exclusive emphasis on orthopraxis. ... This much is certain: orthodoxy and orthopraxis are related each to the other; each feeds the other. If we limit ourselves to one, we reject both" (fn. 34, 180). These ideas, clearly stated in 1971, were developed with particular depth through the dialectic relations between prophetic language and contemplative language in Gutiérrez's work on the book of Job; see *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente: Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job* (Lima: CEP, 2004), 71-202.

[25] In that sense James claims: "I believe that this vulgar fallacy of opposing abstractions to the concretes from which they are abstracted, is the main reason why my account of knowing is deemed so unsatisfactory" "The Meaning of Truth," in *William James Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. B. Kuklick, (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 900-901.

[26] James, *Pragmatism*, 200.

[27] That is why James, with some severity, criticizes Pascal's famous wager (see *Pensamientos* [Madrid: Alianza, 1981], 128-30) in "The Will to Believe": "You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table, it is put to its last trumps. Surely Pascal's own personal belief in masses and holy water had far other springs; and this celebrated page of his is but an argument for others, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart. We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we ourselves were in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward." In *William James Writings, 1878-1899*, ed. B. Kuklick (New York: The Library of America, 2008), 460.

[28] James, *Pragmatism*, emphasis added.

[29] *Ibid.*, 201.

[30] See H. Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), especially the first chapter, "James's Awareness of Religion." Also R. A. Putnam, "Varieties of experience and pluralities of perspective," in *William James and The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. J. Carrete (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 149-60; and R. D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006).

[31] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 21, first emphasis added.

[32] I refer to the thirteenth footnote of the aforementioned text: "It was said that this is a skeptical and materialistic principle [the pragmatic maxim of the practical consequences]. But it is only a single application of the principle of the logic applied by Jesus: 'By their fruits we shall know them', and is closely related to the ideas of the Gospel". The translation is mine and was made from Peirce's revised edition of the article translated by José Vericat in *El hombre, un signo (El pragmatismo de Peirce)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1988).

[33] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 20.

[34] I have examined this issue in detail, as with the rest of the following ideas, in *Minimalismo teológico pragmatista: Los aportes de William James y Gustavo Gutiérrez para la reflexión teológica contemporánea (Pragmatic Theological Minimalism: The Contributions of William James and Gustavo Gutiérrez to the Contemporary Theological Reflection)*, Master's thesis in Philosophy, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, August 2011.

[35] The reason why James chooses to analyze these experiences can be seen in *Varieties*, chapter 1. For a critical approach see C. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), especially chapter 1.

[36] Note that qualifying the religious experience as true by its practical consequences already supposes the shift from the conception of truth that we have suggested above. The problems of this approach are numerous and we cannot deal with them here, but reviewing some texts is highly useful. The reader should first examine the remarks that James himself made on his theory of truth; see *The Meaning of Truth*. Similarly, some texts of critical inquiry are worthy of examination: H. Putnam, "James's theory of truth," in *The Companion to William James*, ed. R. A. Putman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Lamberth. Finally, on the cognitive value of religious experiences see Levinson as well as E. Suckiel, *Heaven's Champion: William James's Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame : Notre Dame University Press, 1996).

[37] In "The Ethics of Belief" (http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/w_k_clifford/ethics_of_belief.html) Clifford maintains: "If the belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town. ... To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." The problem of the perspective defended by Clifford was, as we can see, his always extremely narrow notion of evidence.

[38] In some sense, this is the same kind of reaction that impelled Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus*; see *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 6.54, 7. For a study of the relations between James and Wittgenstein see R. Goodman, *Wittgenstein and William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[39] R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996), 214.

[40] It is important to notice that the plurality and ambiguity of religious traditions, particularly Christianity, is not a modern experience. A very meticulous account of my point is displayed in the monumental work of Paolo Sacchi, *History of the Second Temple Period* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), particularly by the contrast of the theology of the promise (defended by the royal tradition and represented, at the end, by Jesus) and the theology of the alliance (defended by the priestly tradition and represented, at the end, by the Pharisees and scribes). By the way, as noted by Father Carlos Castillo, one of the members of my jury in my thesis defense and the translator of the Spanish edition of Sacchi's book, in some sense the theology of the promise can be related to the theological minimalism defended in this essay.

[41] M. Walzer, *Moralidad en el ámbito local e internacional* (Madrid: Alianza, 1996), 108, my translation.

[42] It should be noted here that developing a theological minimalist strategy does not imply abandoning the values of a particular religious denomination, but it does imply a profound exercise of reflection to determine the core elements of any faith and which are just secondary. That is the precondition to a real hermeneutic dialogue not undermined by issues whose importance is only relative. In this regard the work of David Tracy's public theology is particularly enlightening because of his effort to establish the core of the Christian message, the classic event of the self-manifestation of God through Jesus Christ, by means of the apocalyptic and doctrinal correctives. See *The Analogical Imagination*, 265 and ff.

[43] Something very different happens with other attempts of secularization, in my opinion, that markedly deviate from the Christian tradition, resulting in alienating theological expressions that are indistinguishable from a mere secular morality. Expressions of this type are studied by Victor Anderson in his *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of Religion and Public Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), although the author does not share the critical view offered here.

[44] An outline of the principal theological antecedents of Gutiérrez's liberation theology can be found in the writings of authors like Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Marie-Dominique Chenu, and Yves Congar, among others. In general, the most important influence on Gutiérrez's work was the French *nouvelle théologie*, although theologians like Karl Rahner were significant as well. For a comprehensive study of the role of *nouvelle théologie*, see R. Gibellini, *La teología del siglo XX* (Burgos: Sal Terrae, 1998). For the influence of Rahner in Gutiérrez, see Martínez.

[45] For a discussion of the reasons that make the Episcopal Conference of Aparecida a legitimating magisterial document for liberation theology, see G. Gutiérrez, "La opción preferencial por el pobre en Aparecida," *Revista Páginas* no. 206, 6-25.

[46] See *supra*, footnote 10 of this paper, about the concept of liberation in Gutiérrez's theology.

[47] Arguedas (January 18, 1911-November 28, 1969) was a Peruvian novelist, poet, and anthropologist who wrote mainly in Spanish, although some of his poetry is in Quechua. He is generally considered one of the foremost figures of twentieth-century Peruvian letters. Among his principal writings are *Yawar Fiesta*, *Los ríos profundos*, and *Todas las sangres*.

[48] I have dealt with the intellectual and personal relationships of both thinkers in "Arguedas y Gutiérrez: los ríos profundos del pobre," *Revista Páginas* 219 (Lima: CEP, 2010). For a direct account of the relations, see the interview with Gutiérrez in "Arguedas, Las Casas y el Dios liberador," A. y R. Ames Gallego (comp.), *Acordarse de los pobres. Gustavo Gutiérrez. Textos esenciales* (Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, 2003). Another example, perhaps more clearly stated, of the minimalist dialogical strategy indicated above can be seen in J. Iguñiz, "Freedom in Amartya Sen and Gustavo Gutiérrez: Religious and Secular Common Grounds," *How Should We Talk About Religion? Perspectives, Contexts, Particularities* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2006).