

**A STUDY IN HUMAN NATURE ENTITLED
*THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*¹**

James Campbell
The University of Toledo

Shortly after the appearance of William James's volume, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in June 1902, Josiah Royce commented on contemporary religious life at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association. Royce noted that, on the one hand, "Religion, in its higher sense, constitutes the most important business of the human being. . ." By this he was referring to his conviction that

man's present and worldly life, as experience shows it to us, is, even in the most fortunate cases, a comparatively petty affair, whose passing joys and sorrows can be viewed as of serious and permanent importance only in case this life means what it at present never empirically presents to us, namely a task and a destiny that have, from some higher point of view, an absolute value.

On the other hand, Royce complained that "in human history, Religion in proportion to its importance, characteristically appears as amongst the worst managed, if not the very worst managed, of all of humanity's undertakings" (1903, 280–81). Here he pointed to the array of con-tending faiths whose sectarian pursuits have resulted in an endless stream of misunderstandings and conflicts.

In his Gifford Lectures in Natural Religion, delivered in two series between May 1901 and June 1902, James said little about Royce's latter point but much about the importance of religion to human life. In this discussion of *Varieties*, I want to examine four general issues. The first is James's psychological method for approaching the topic of religious experience. The second is his understanding of the meaning of religious experience, and religion in general, in human life. James's prior

commitments to the importance of the religious interpretation of life are my third concern. Fourth and finally, I offer my own evaluation of what James accomplished in *Varieties*.

1.

From the start of his lectures in Edinburgh, James admitted to being "neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist." What James was, of course, was a skilled psychologist; as he notes, "To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution" (James [1902] 1985, 12). Thus, the reports of nervous instability and psychical visitations, trances and voices and visions, melancholy and obsessions and fixed ideas that he details in *Varieties* should draw the interest of the psychologist just as strongly as other mental phenomena do. Considering the phenomenon of instantaneous conversion, for example, James writes, "Were we writing the story of the mind from the purely natural-history point of view, with no religious interest whatever, we should still have to write down man's liability to sudden and complete conversion as one of his most curious peculiarities." Whether we are ultimately to interpret such a conversion as "a miracle in which God is present as he is present in no change of heart less strikingly abrupt" or as "a strictly natural process. . . neither more nor less divine in its mere causation and mechanism than any other process, high or low, of man's interior life . . ." (188), the conversion experience is an event to which the psychologist should attend. In the careful quasi-clinical setting into which his lectures introduced his audience, James the psychologist proceeds with an inquiry that attempts to provide "a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate . . ." (14).

James tells us that physiological psychology maintains "definite psycho-physical connexions to hold good" and assumes that "the dependence of mental states upon

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bodily conditions must be thorough-going and complete” (20). He continues that, even though its methods are far different from those traditionally associated with inquiries into spiritual matters, this psychological mode of inquiry does not amount to a rejection, or even a disparagement, of religion. He recognizes, of course, that to handle the phenomena of religious experience “biologically and psychologically as if they were mere curious facts of individual history,” might suggest to some individuals “a degradation of so sublime a subject,” or worse an attempt “to discredit the religious side of life” (14); but he sees no necessary connection between his use of the methods of science and any efforts to undermine the potential human value of religion. As he writes, “[H]ow can such an existential account of facts of mental history decide in one way or another upon their spiritual significance?” Psychology explores, in a manner that applies equally well to “the dicta of the sturdy atheist” and to “those of the Methodist under conviction anxious about his soul” (20), how individuals understand their existence. James the psychologist maintains that religious behavior is still human behavior, and that the various phenomena of the religious life— melancholy, trances, conversions, and so on—are each “special cases of kinds of human experience of much wider scope” (28). To understand these religious phenomena as continuous with the rest of human behavior, he continues, “[W]e cannot possibly ignore these pathological aspects of the subject. We must describe and name them just as if they occurred in nonreligious men” (17).

James’s introduction of the concept of ‘pathology’ here ought not to suggest that he views religious experiences as episodes of mental illness. The term implies, rather, an amplification or excessiveness of a sort that he believes is particularly helpful to scientific inquiries. We know that, as a general tactic, James “loaded the lectures with concrete examples,” maintaining that “a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas, however deep. . . .” We know further that he chose many of these

examples from among what he calls “the extremer expressions of the religious temperament.” While he recognized that his concentration on such “convulsions of piety” (5) might make some in his audience uncomfortable,² his intention was to portray religion in “its more completely evolved and perfect forms” (12).

While James does not explicate this opaque phrase here, he does suggest what he has in mind through a series of analogies elsewhere in *Varieties*. He notes, for example, that “we learn most about a thing when we view it under a microscope, as it were, or in its most exaggerated form” (40). If we want to understand fully what arthritis or diabetes is, we should not attempt to study the medical impact of these diseases on patients who are only slightly or moderately afflicted. In a similar fashion, if we want to understand what religion is, we will not advance very far by studying its modest impact on the “ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan” (15). In a second analogy, James suggests that just as “[i]t is a good rule in physiology, when we are studying the meaning of an organ, to ask after its most peculiar and characteristic sort of performance, and to seek its office in that one of its functions which no other organ can possibly exert,” a similar rule applies in the case of religion. “The essence

² See, for example, Coe 1903: “No effort is made to separate the typical from the aberrational. . . . The average religious man is even said to be an imitator of the extremist, who is the ‘pattern-setter.’ . . . The finished picture, however, owing to the exceeding prominence given to morbid growths, can hardly be regarded as a portrait” (66–67). See also Sewall 1903: “Professor James has treated here of every variety of religious experience, save that of genuine religion itself . . . what is described in the entertaining and oftentimes amusing chapters . . . is only a collection of eccentric examples of emotional or intellectual disorder, and by no means of the normal and healthy religion of everyday life as the average world know and respect it, however varied and unsuccessful are their efforts to realize it. . . . To study religion by these examples is to the average religious mind like walking through a medical museum, as compared with watching a body of healthy youth on a spring morning in the athletic field” (246–50).

of religious experiences, the thing by which we finally must judge them, must be that element or quality in them which we can meet nowhere else," he writes. "And such a quality will be of course more prominent and easy to notice in those religious experiences which are most one-sided, exaggerated, and intense" (44). In a third analogy, James treats the more extreme figures as uniquely valuable witnesses. "To learn the secrets of any science, we go to expert specialists, even though they may be eccentric persons," he notes, "and not to commonplace pupils" (383). While the latter are more frequent and familiar, they can provide us with none of the special insights of the former who can offer us the exotic fruits of their extreme experiences. As he writes, "a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and excentric" (15).

Thus, for James, we need to examine not individuals for whom religion is "a dull habit," but those for whom it is "an acute fever." He understands the typical member of the former group as being religious only at "second-hand": "His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit." Little is to be gained from the study of such individuals. The opposite is true of members of the latter group, made up of individuals who burn with religious fervor. These individuals, whom James characterizes as the "geniuses" of religion, have demonstrated in their lives all sorts of "peculiarities" that the typical churchgoer has not; but, while admitting that these experiences are "ordinarily classed as pathological" (15), he defends their careful examination. Consequently, we should stay with the most flamboyant examples of religious experience: "The only cases likely to be profitable enough to repay our attention will therefore be cases where the religious spirit is unmistakable and extreme" (40).

From this initial focus upon "the acute religion of the few against the chronic religion of the many" (98), James

develops *Varieties* in separate directions, which he calls "two orders of inquiry." The first is the continued psychological inquiry into the nature of our "religious propensities;" the second, a philosophical inquiry into their "significance" (13). And, while the exploration of the religious propensities of his many witnesses fills the bulk of the volume, this should not suggest that the latter inquiry into the significance of these experiences was of only secondary interest to James. The experiential data admittedly fascinated him and drew him to explore them more deeply than he had originally intended; but, at the same time, he was drawn to this project as a would-be believer seeking answers to his own philosophical questions about the value of religious experience. We can thus sense a strong tension in *Varieties*: while the psychological method for examining these religious experiences should lead to no conclusions about their overall meaning, James was strongly drawn to examine the data of these experiences by his prior beliefs (or hopes) about what they might mean. James begins the lectures attempting to balance out the contributions of the psychological scientist and the religious believer, but, during the course of the lectures, the believer wins.

2.

With a clearer sense of James's method, we can turn to a more careful examination of the topic of religion. As we have seen, his primary interest was in the vagaries of religious experience. As a consequence, he demonstrates little or no concern for institutional or doctrinal questions; his focus is upon individuals. "The religious experience," he writes, "lives itself out within the private breast" (269). For James, *Varieties* is thus intended to be an inquiry into the various "feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (34). Given this level of generality and individual distinctness, he

recognizes that it would be futile to hope to attain a science of religion. While James is dedicated to the appropriately rigorous inquiries of psychological science, he also recognizes that, at least with regard to this topic, our language is not capable of sustaining such rigor. In “a field of experience where there is not a single conception that can be sharply drawn,” he writes, to pretend “to be rigorously ‘scientific’ or ‘exact’ in our terms would only stamp us as lacking in understanding of our task” (39). Rather, what he attempts to do is to study the reports of his various witnesses free from sectarian blinders in an attempt to uncover commonalities among the experiences.

James’s tentative distillation of individuals’ religious feelings, acts, and experiences does not violate this openness. He writes simply that “the life of religion . . . consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (51). While he recognizes that theology offers many different interpretations of this unseen order and of our proper adjustment to it, he emphasizes that to explore these differences is to move away from the core aspect of religious experience. He writes:

When we survey the whole field of religion, we find a great variety in the thoughts that have prevailed there; but the feelings on the one hand and the conduct on the other are almost always the same. . . . The theories which Religion generates, being thus variable, are secondary; and if you wish to grasp her essence, you must look to the feelings and the conduct as being the more constant elements. (397)

Setting aside these feelings and conduct for the moment, we can linger briefly with the “common nucleus” of “intellectual content” that all religions share. James writes that, after “[t]he warring gods and formulas of the various religions do indeed cancel each other,” there remains a “uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet.” This common core has two aspects. The first aspect of all religions is an “uneasiness . . . a

sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand.” The second is “the solution” to this uneasiness: the feeling that “*we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connexion with the higher powers” (399–400).

There are two points to be made at this juncture. The first is the importance of remembering that James the psychologist is simply reporting the content of these religious feelings as distilled from the testimony of his many witnesses. Any claims about whether there *is* something wrong with us, or how we *might be* saved, must come later. The second point is James’s claim that this message enters human experience, if at all, only by means of feeling or emotion. Reason or argumentation—dogmatics—plays a distinctly minor role in his understanding of religion. The religious person is not one whose mind is particularly attuned to appreciate proofs, but one who has “a trustful sense of presence” (353) that turns his or her life around. Religion offers humans an “added dimension of emotion”; and, since it offers a solution to our uneasiness, religion plays a positive role in human experience. “Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject’s range of life,” James writes. “It gives him a new sphere of power.” Those who have come through the sorts of religious experiences that he describes recognize a kind of salvation. There is, he writes, a “new reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes. . . . This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion” (46–47). What we find in part, James writes, are feelings of two sorts: that there is more to existence than meets the senses, and that we can live in a comfortable dependence on unseen powers.

Beginning with the first of these feelings, James writes that the many experiences that he explores “prove the existence in our mental machinery of a sense of present reality more diffused and general than that which our

special senses yield" (58–59). Expanding upon this point, he continues: "It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence*, a perception of what we may call '*something there*,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed" (55). James's use of "proof" here should not suggest, of course, that there is such a more, just that many humans feel with certainty that a more exists. Similarly, when he writes that "[p]sychology and religion . . . both admit that there are forces seemingly outside of the conscious individual that bring redemption to his life," he is not asserting any scientific proof of redemption but only recording his witnesses' feelings that redemption is real. As James makes explicit, in fact, psychology defines these forces as subconscious rather than supernatural, and suggests "that they do not transcend the individual's personality" (174).

Further discussing the notion of the subconscious, James writes that as a result of nitrous oxide intoxication he was able to recognize that

our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the required stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. (307–8)

Leaving aside the chemical origin of this insight, James maintains that any adequate psychological account must somewhere incorporate the reports of the similar religious experiences to which he points throughout *Varieties*. "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded," he writes. "How to regard them is the question— for they are so discontinuous with

ordinary consciousness" (308). One obvious way to incorporate them, of course, is through supernaturalism. Under such an account, "the level of full sunlit consciousness" becomes but the smaller region of consciousness, surrounded or fringed by a much larger "transmarginal or subliminal region." This larger region is the region of supernatural meaning to which not all humans have ready access. "In persons deep in the religious life," James writes, "the door into this region seems unusually wide open; at any rate, experiences making their entrance through that door have had emphatic influence in shaping religious history" (381). The supernatural approach thus can incorporate the psychological explanation into its religious version of the data of the subconscious. "If the grace of God miraculously operates," James writes for example, "it probably operates through the subliminal door" (218).

At this point, James steps back a bit from the religious interpretation. Noting that we need "a way of describing the 'more,' which psychologists may also recognize as real," he writes, "[t]he *subconscious self* is nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity; and I believe that in it we have exactly the mediating term required. Apart from all religious considerations, there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of" (402). In this vast well of memories and hopes, ideals and expectations, is to be found a broader self than is at any time actually present to consciousness. This well also functions as a vast reservoir of energies to which our normally tepid lives can gain access through proper efforts.³ And, drawing nearer to the religious interpretation of this subconscious, James is also willing to hypothesize "that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life." Thus, he suggests that our interpretation of this feeling of a

³ Compare "The Powers of Men" (1907), in James (1982, 147–61).

more can start with the “recognized psychological fact” of the subconscious and still embrace the religious interpretation, preserving for his psychological inquiry “a contact with ‘science’ which the ordinary theologian lacks” (403). It would still seem to be possible, however, to recognize the more feeling without accepting the religious interpretation of it that James favors by emphasizing the possibility of delusion in our welcoming as other forms of consciousness what might be simple misinterpretations of normal consciousness.

The second of these religious feelings is that we live in a kind of benign dependency on unseen powers. James notes in the testimonies of many of his witnesses a feeling of passivity and a contentment with reliance upon the divine. “There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others,” he writes, “in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God.” James views this mentality of untroubled reliance as a “gift,” whether “a gift of God’s grace” or “a gift of our organism” he does not here decide. In either case, it is something that is unchosen: this feeling of benign dependency is “either there or not there for us, and there are persons who can no more become possessed by it than they can fall in love with a given woman by mere word of command” (46). Concentrating on those in whom this feeling of dependency is prominent, James continues:

That personal attitude which the individual finds himself impelled to take up towards what he apprehends to be the divine . . . will prove to be both a helpless and a sacrificial attitude. That is, we shall have to confess to at least some amount of dependence on sheer mercy, and to practice some amount of renunciation, great or small, to save our souls alive. (49)

Even the non-religious must all admit, James writes, that “we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe. . . .” In the religious person, this dependence becomes a happy one in which we can rely confidently

upon divine support. “*Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary,*” he writes, “and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute.” What sort of vindication this might be is a difficult question to answer, however, since it is clear that the psychologist can do no more than recognize the power of this feeling in those who have it. While it is certainly true that, for those of us who have this feeling, religion “becomes an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill” (49), the psychologist must still maintain that this feeling is open to other non-religious interpretations by those who, unlike James, do not feel religion’s vital importance and who reject the moral holidays that dependency would allow.

One further theme from the topic of religion is the question of immortality. Focusing as he does upon religious experience, James almost completely avoids the extra-experiential question of immortality in *Varieties*.⁴ He recognizes, of course, the general importance of the question to many religious individuals, noting that “[r]eligion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race *means* immortality, and nothing else.” His defense of his omission is two-part. On one side, he asserts that religious persons do, or at least should, care more for their ideals than for themselves. As he writes, “[i]f only our ideals are cared for in ‘eternity,’ I do not see why we might not be willing to resign their care to other hands than ours” (412). On the other, he notes that in any case no *guarantees* of immortality are necessary. “For practical life at any rate, the *chance* of salvation is enough,” he writes. “No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance” (414).

⁴ Compare “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine” (1898), in James (1982, 75–101).

3.

I have already suggested that James the psychologist loses out in the course of *Varieties* to James the believer. We have seen several cases in which James inclined his interpretations of the data toward the religious, attempting to show that nothing in the data would preclude a religious interpretation. He, of course, does not assert proof of his case; but he does assert that the religious case has not been disproven, and that in this non-disproven state religious belief is justifiable. Further, the broad survey of religious experience as a study of human behavior is designed to strengthen James's case because it demonstrates the breadth of the religious interpretation.

One of the most important varieties of religious experience that James discusses is mysticism. He writes that "personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness"; and he explores these states and their four "marks"—ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity—at great length. With regard to such mystical states, however, James admits that "my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand" (301). Given his earlier disparagement of indirect religion, his admission about mysticism might have suggested that James would avoid the topic. He continues, however, to defend strongly the evidentiary value of reports about what he has not himself experienced:

The first thing to bear in mind (especially if we ourselves belong to the cleric-academic-scientific type, the officially and conventionally 'correct' type, 'the deadly respectable' type, for which to ignore others is a besetting temptation) is that nothing can be more stupid than to bar out phenomena from our notice, merely because we are incapable of taking any part in them ourselves. (95)

Although perhaps initially puzzling, James's position does not contain a contra-diction. Rather, he is maintaining

that our inquiries into areas like religious experience are not likely to advance very far if we admit into consideration only what is universally experienced. Proceeding from the general Jamesian premise that "to no one type of man whatsoever is the total fullness of truth immediately revealed," he reaches the clearly Jamesian conclusion that "[e]ach of us has to borrow from the other parts of truth seen better from the other's point of view." He continues that, "like the traveller, whose testimony about foreign countries we should be foolish not to believe," so too individuals' religious experiences are "fit to be taken as *evidence*. . . ." As to the question of whether such an individual can "instruct us as to the actual existence of a higher world with which our world is in relation, even though personally he be in other respects no better than ourselves," James leaves behind his psychological stand and, in accordance with his interpretation of the more and of human dependency, comes down on the side of supernaturalism and answers in the affirmative (383–84).

While James was neither a theologian nor a scholar of religions, he was—or at least wanted to be—a believer. A brief survey of his other writings on religion makes this clear. Earlier, in *The Will to Believe*, he tells us that "[w]e cannot live or think at all without some degree of faith". James sees this faith as present in the various working hypotheses that direct our living into the future, some of which "can be refuted in five minutes, others may defy ages" ([1897] 1979, 79). As we live forward, our faith will have the opportunity to verify itself. "Believe, and you shall be right, for you shall save yourself; doubt, and you shall again be right, for you shall perish," James writes. "The only difference is that to believe is greatly to your advantage" (80). When the case under consideration is live, forced, and momentous, he continues, "we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will" (32); and one category of such cases is the religious with its belief that "the best things

are the more eternal things . . ." (29). Then, in "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," James writes that theism is superior to materialism if for no other reason than "it guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved." He continues that "[m]aterialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; theism means the affirmation of an eternal order and the letting loose of hope"; and he notes further that the desire that there be such an eternal moral order is "one of the deepest needs of our breast" ([1907] 1975, 264; cf. 55). Later, in *Pragmatism*, he recognizes the importance of this hope to human life, noting that: "On pragmatic principles we cannot reject any hypothesis if consequences useful to life flow from it" (131). For example, he continues, "if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true." Further, he maintains that "whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work . . ." (143). And, while James admits that believing in God might not work for everyone, he still maintains the right of those individuals for whom it does work to continue to believe at their own risk. "In the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions," he writes, "and I deny the right of any pretended logic to veto my own faith" (142).

In the "Conclusions" chapter of *Varieties*, James continues in this vein. "Disregarding the over-beliefs, and confining ourselves to what is common and generic," he writes, "we have in *the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*, a positive content of religious experience which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes*" ([1902] 1985, 405). There has surely been a gradual but complete shift here, from the earlier stance of psychological inquirer to this current religious stance. Earlier in *Varieties*, James spoke of an unseen order to which we should adjust as simply the message of religion. Now, he presents us with the claim that this message—that the conscious person is

continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come—is literally and objectively true. Even if we take seriously his puzzling caveat "as far as it goes," James is no longer simply recording the experiences of his witnesses and telling us what they believe these experiences mean. He is now telling us that the picture the witnesses present is a true one. James tells us that there is another dimension of our existence, a "mystical" or "supernatural" one beyond "the sensible and merely 'understandable' world." He tells us that this "unseen region" is the source of our "ideal impulses" and that it produces "effects" in this world. He tells us that when we commune with this unseen region, "work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change." And, using the term "God" as our "natural appellation . . . for the supreme reality" or for "this higher part of the universe," James tells us that "[w]e and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled." Surely, he has moved beyond the evidence present in his psychological inquiries. He has shifted from his exposition of what his witnesses believed to a defense, not of the actuality, but of the truth of their beliefs. The answer to the question of why James did this must be sought in his pragmatic justification of religion in terms of its effects in the lives of believers. As he writes, "that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal" (406).

4.

So far, we have considered James's presentation of a number of themes related to the broad topic of religion and religious experience. One was the sensible psychological theme that no apparently natural, or even pathological, roots can undermine "the worth of a thing" (193). Using this standard, no religious experience could

be eliminated from consideration by discrediting its bodily origin. "To the medical mind," James admits, "these ecstasies signify nothing but suggested and imitated hypnoid states, on an intellectual basis of superstition, and a corporeal one of degeneration and hysteria." He continues, however, that even if "these pathological conditions have existed in many and possibly in all the cases," this information tells us nothing about "the value for knowledge of the consciousness which they induce." Any judgment that we might pass upon those religious states must be based not upon "superficial medical talk" but upon inquiries "into their fruits for life" (327). A second theme was James's requirement that we be "as objective and receptive" (301) as we can to the testimony of others. *Varieties*, except for its thin shell of theory, a treasury of such testimonies; and admitting them into evidence is both good psychology and a way that we can broaden our perspectives on the meaning of life. We have most recently begun to consider the combination of these themes in James's pragmatic willingness to characterize various individuals' testimonies of the *value* to be drawn from religion as evidence for its *truth*.

James offers a brief sketch of aspects of his developing pragmatism in the course of *Varieties*. In particular, he is interested here in grounding theoretical discussions in "what practical difference would result from one alternative or the other being true" (350). Using this criterion, James maintains that God's "metaphysical attributes"—aseity, necessariness, immateriality, indivisibility, and so on—have no significance for human experience (351). As he puts it, "candidly speaking, how do such qualities as these make any definite connexion with our life?" Further, he wonders, "if they severally call for no distinctive adaptations of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man's religion whether they be true or false?" (352). For James, on the contrary, the important aspects of religion are important because they do make a difference in life.

What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors. All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine. . . renewing themselves in saecula saeculorum in the lives of humble private men. (352)

The situation is completely different, however, with what James calls God's "moral" attributes, like holiness, omnipotence, justice, and love. These attributes, James believes, *work* in life. "They positively determine fear and hope and expectation . . ." (353).

Throughout *Varieties*, James discusses the various religious experiences as "psychological phenomena." As such, he writes, they possess "enormous biological worth." Still, he recognizes that it is a fair question to ask about "the objective 'truth' of their content. . . ." Here James is separating into two questions what he normally wants to treat as one. Recognizing, he writes, "the natural propensity of man . . . to believe that whatever has great value for life is thereby certified as true," he here considers truth as "something additional to bare value for life. . . ." For example, while he considered previously the value of the feeling of a more, he now wants to consider this question: "Is such a 'more' merely our own notion, or does it really exist?" (401). The problem with pursuing this second line of inquiry is, as we have seen in the consideration of faith, that our attempts to reach an answer here may defy ages of serious effort; the lives of many potential believers could suffer in the meantime. Thus James is drawn quickly back to a blending of the questions of usefulness and of truth. This is the sense in which he writes "the uses of religion, its uses to the individual who has it, and the uses of the individual himself to the world, are the best arguments that truth is in it" (361). James had perceived all of this earlier in *Varieties*, when he wrote that religious opinions, like any other respectable opinions, must be tested "by logic and by experiment" and not by "their

author's neurological type." We must test our beliefs; but these tests must be broad in nature, considering such criteria as "[i]mmediate luminousness, . . . philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness" (23).

This folding of the question of truth into the question of value is a further instance of James's position that in the fullness of experience there is much that reason cannot prove. As he writes early in *Varieties*, "if we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial." There is much that we believe without "articulate reasons"; and, while James admits that this rational component has great prestige "for it has the loquacity, it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words," he still maintains that rationality is of lesser importance in the full life of the person. The rational part of your mental life, he writes,

will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions. If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits . . . something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it. (66–67)

James tells us here that he is speaking as a psychologist, not as a logician, simply recognizing the fact that people tend to follow their intuitions. "I do not yet say that it is *better* that the subconscious and non-rational should thus hold primacy in the religious realm," he writes. "I confine myself to simply pointing out that they do so hold it as a matter of fact" (68).

We have already seen how James works out the importance of results in his discussion of what he called the metaphysical and moral attributes of God. Setting

aside the former sort as irrelevant to life, James concentrated on our intuitions about the latter. Continuing on in this vein, he writes that religious people believe "that not only they themselves, but the whole universe of beings to whom the God is present, are secure in his parental hands." In this happy dependence, they rest assured of a happy outcome:

God's existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition, so that where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things. (407)

In spite of the fact that the actual existence of God is the guarantee of this ideality, however, James is less concerned with what he sees as the necessarily futile attempt to prove the existence of God than he is with recognizing the power that individuals can draw from the belief in God to order their lives. In a similar fashion, we can consider James's discussion of non-petitional prayer, which he considers to be "the very soul and essence of religion . . . religion in act." What occurs in prayer, he writes, is "the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence . . ." (365–66). This formulation implies successful contact, although elsewhere in *Varieties* James is more guarded (or psychological) in his formulations. He tells us, for example, that one of "the characteristics of the religious life" is the *belief* that "prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof—be that spirit 'God' or 'law'—is a process wherein work is really done . . ." (382). Ultimately, however, it seems that James does adopt the believer's position of contact through prayer. He writes, as we have seen above, that there is an unseen region that produces effects in this world. By this, James means that when we interact by prayer with the more, something positive happens to us: work is done upon us and we are turned into new men. Here again, James is

more concerned with the positive effects of our beliefs than with the reality of our religious objects. In both of these cases—the intuitions of dependency that give rise to feelings of comfort and the prayers that strengthen individuals in the troughs of life—James’s point is that for some people religious interpretations work wonders, bringing comfort and power to their lives. How are we to address, however, the problem that the content of these interpretations—that there is a caring God whom we can contact through prayer—may not be strictly true?

One possibility is to apply James’s criteria for evaluating mystical states to this larger issue to get a sense of the worth of religious experiences in general. In response to the question of whether “the mystic range of consciousness” furnishes “any warrant for the truth of the twice-bornness and supernaturality and pantheism which it favors,” he replies:

(1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come. . . . (2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically. . . . (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith. (334–35)

Expanding this approach beyond the question of mystical states, we can say that, for James, those individuals whose religious propensities offer them a rich and working vision of life should be respected in their beliefs and practices. Because these beliefs and practices bring positive results for life, they are in some sense true for these individuals. For those, on the other hand, who have no such propensities, religious beliefs and practices can and should claim no authority. This clear and measured stance seems quite fine so far; but James’s third point is more problematic. He seems to be

advocating the position that, because some individuals recognize a more that works in their lives, we too must offer it a place in ours. The authority of the rationalistic consciousness would be forced to make room for other forms of consciousness and the demands of his third criterion would seem to eliminate the protections of the second.

In this justification of religious experience, James the believer moves too quickly. If a religious idea or belief yields *any* measure of success in life, he would characterize it as verified; but our rich history of hasty generalizations and successful superstitions and seemingly undying prejudices should caution us to greater restraint. Clearly, recognizing that some individuals claim that there is a more, and that these claimants derive personal benefits from living in accordance with their claim, need commit us in no way to the reality of a more. Democratic tolerance for others may challenge us to include their experiences, but it cannot require us to accept their interpretations of those experiences. We can, in other words, admit their testimony without accepting all of its content. I have no doubt, for example, that there are many individuals who believe that their recovery from addiction would never have happened without God’s help. I accept both their recovery and their interpretation of it; but this surely does not mean that there is a God. To the stalwart psychologist, it means two things: the first is that humans can, when challenged, accomplish remarkable things; the second, that the religious approach to living can provide powerful challenges. It surely does not mean, however, that the religious interpretation is true.

I realize that I live in a smaller and thinner world than people of religious convictions. It is possible that I am just spiritually myopic, unable to see the connections between the experiences that others report and their proper supernatural interpretation. In *Pragmatism*, James offers an analogical argument that seems apposite

here. He writes there that human experience is not “the highest form of experience extant in the universe.” Rather, “we stand in much the same relation to the whole of the universe as our canine and feline pets do to the whole of human life.” Just as they can take part in our lives only up to a certain level— inhabiting “our drawing-rooms and libraries” and dumbly witnessing “scenes of whose significance they have no inkling” ([1907] 1975, 143)—so too may I be able to recognize only part of what others can. I may be dumbly witnessing all sorts of religious mysteries that I cannot understand. James’s clever analogy is, of course, indefeasible, but that makes it neither true nor false.

I began with a brief consideration of a paper by Josiah Royce, in which he describes religion as the most important business of the human being because it can offer a context for our passing experiences and give our lives “absolute value.” In *Varieties*, James offers a similar comment:

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance . . . and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place round them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to an anxious trembling. ([1902] 1985, 119–20)

From my myopic depths I must admit that, for some people, this is sadly true. Such individuals find the natural interpretation of human existence a pale and inadequate shadow when compared to the supernatural perspective. This fact is as true about human nature today as it was when James was preparing *Varieties* a century ago; and he may be correct when he predicts that “[r]eligion, occupying herself with personal destinies and keeping thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history” (396). It is fair to ask at this point, however, who is speaking: is it James the psychologist or James the believer?

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