William James and the Psychology of Religion

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INTRODUCTION

In 1901 and 1902, famed American psychologist and philosopher William James presented the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion, at Edinburgh, Scotland. This series of lectures, focusing on the psychological underpinnings of religious belief, was published that last year as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a book almost immediately recognized as the philosophical and literary classic it is now enshrined as. This paper will provide a high-level overview of James’ groundbreaking concepts of religious psychology.

Over 100 years later, the views presented by James remain a watershed in understanding how divinity operates in conjunction with the human mind. His main concern, though addressed in the final chapters, is not the broader questions that philosophers and theologians have struggled with since the dawn of reason. Is God merely a construct of our thoughts, a mental formation? Does it exist in reality or is God, so to speak, merely a figment of our needy imaginations?

His interest, instead, is more direct and personal. From a scientist’s perspective, he looks at how religion, and perhaps God, works within the mind. He asks, over and over, what are the practical fruits to individuals of their religious beliefs and practices? What is harmful? What is good for mental health? What leads them to these beliefs? How does religious belief change their personality? He examines the psychological conditions that provide fertile ground for certain spiritual experiences.

In the end, his investigation does lead to the broader questions, but at that point it becomes anticlimactic. If God exists, he seems to suggest, it exists differently for every mind. So much more fascinating than these existential questions, is the literally millions of ways in which divinity touches man through the portal of his mind.

A brief biography, for the message is more important than the man. James was the son of a religion writer and the brother of famed novelist Henry James. After struggling for decades to find his own calling, as well as with depression and constant poor health, James turned to psychology and became a leader in the field. He published an important treatise, *The Principles of Psychology*, at the age of 48 and became president of the American Psychology Association four years later.

His fascination with religious experience was more than scientific or philosophical, especially concerning mystical experience. Like others in the late 19th century, he personally sought to touch the face of God through narcotically-induced experiments with such drugs as chloral hydrate, amyl nitrate, nitrous oxide and peyote (James, 1882). In that way, he was the precursor of modern experimenters such as Timothy Leary, who also sought divinity through drugs. James was also a frequent participant in séances in his quest for spiritual knowledge.

The historical intellectual framework of James’ work included not only the formation of modern psychology, but also theological ferment over such concepts as transcendentalism and other new “liberal” ideas of religion, including the beginnings of New Thought and the Unity movement. He associated with and debated such giants of the time as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harvard colleague Josiah Royce.
THE METHODOLOGY

His psychological study should not be compared to modern ones which, for example, might look at the neurology behind meditation or prayer. James’ approach is classic psychological investigation through the analysis of case studies. He admits many of these are of the more extreme type, but makes the case that it is these starker examples which give a clearer picture of the operations of the mind.

Though he insists his methods are scientific and empirical, he culls many of his studies from remote subjects he has never had contact with, including biographies and memoirs of saints and other spiritual leaders. His own personal interviews or correspondence with any subjects are relatively minimal. From that perspective, it might be easy for scientists to reject the validity of his outcomes. If one should therefore consider him more of a philosopher on the subject than a scientist, so be it. In his final chapters he in fact mostly rejects the concept of a science of religion, or at least severely limits it. Whatever the label one puts on his work, it is the strength of his insights into the workings of the mind that makes *Varieties* worth its hefty weight.

James begins by rejecting what he calls medical materialism, which seeks to explain all religious experiences through mere physical causation. He scoffs at the notion that Saint Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus was just “a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic” (James, 2004, p. 24).

He does admit that spiritual events, like all states of mind, are in the end neurally conditioned. That is, they have an organic, physical causation. He is not talking about their ultimate, transcendental origin, but their manifestation in the mind, in the physical brain. As mentioned before, that is the focus of many modern studies, but that is not the heart of the matter for James.

In the end, he says, origin is irrelevant. Causation of religious thought or experience, be it organic or divine, does not decides its real value, either to society—or more importantly—to the individual.

To plead the organic causation of a religious state of mind, then, in refutation of its claim to possess superior spiritual value, is quite illogical and arbitrary, unless one have [sic] already worked out in advance some psycho-physical theory connecting spiritual values in general with determinate sorts of physiological change. Otherwise none of our thoughts and feelings, not even our scientific doctrines, not even our dis-beliefs, could retain any value as revelations of the truth, for every one of them without exception flows from the state of their possessor’s body at the time. (James, 2004, p. 25)

Similarly, he does not care much for the theologian’s contention that the origin is divine, not physical. That particular point, of course, can never be proven scientifically, and in later chapters he methodically destroys many theological proofs. All arguments over origin, whether physical or theological, are irrelevant.

Spiritual experience and belief should be judged instead by two criteria he proposes. They are: “Immediate luminousness, in short, *philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness*” [emphasis original] (James, 2004, p. 28). His criteria are similar to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, in which theological reflection is conducted thru the lenses of reason, experience, tradition, and
scripture (Williams). While James only uses two of the four lenses in his work (reason and experience), he is clearly overlapping with some aspects of conventional theological discussion.

First of all, he is saying the belief must be reasonable when viewed through common experience. This test is grayer than James might allow. One perhaps rightly rejects the logic of wearing gym shoes and waiting for a spaceship, but where does the line get drawn with the more fantastic aspects of even traditional religions? There are, indeed, aspects of Christianity some already consider fantastic.

His second test, the moral good that comes from the religious experience, is no more provable. It is this concern that dominates James’ thinking. For spirituality is in the end very personal. It is only as good as the good it does for the individual. There is a larger good to others, and to society, but that is only a corollary to it making one a better person. One’s actual experience is paramount.

**EMOTIONS AND MENTAL FORMATIONS OF RELIGION**

The personal impact begins with how our divine ideas touch our emotions. James was a trailblazer in studying human emotions, and wrote some key treatises on the subject, such as *What is an Emotion?* Put simply, emotion is a feeling and an object, real or imagined, for that feeling.

There is no singular religious emotion, but several types that differentiate them from more common emotions. Thoughts of the divine, for one, prompt solemn reactions, what he calls a “hush to all vain chatter” (James, 2004, p.44). This is even true with religious ecstasy or joy, which he describes as “preserv(ing) a sort of bitter in its sweetness” (p. 53).

Religious feeling is different than just being moralistic or philosophical, in that it offers absolute joy in the form of complete trust and complete surrender. The stoic’s bravery is nothing to that of the saint’s. The stoic merely acquiesces and holds back death and fear temporarily. “Religious happiness,” says James, “is no mere relief or escape…inwardly it knows (evil) to be permanently overcome” (James, 2004, p. 54).

The most important mental formation about religion is how the mind perceives what it labels as an objective divine presence, whether one calls it God, spirit or by other terms. The most obvious such feelings are hallucinations and mystic experiences (including moments of bliss), but many sense this less tangibly and yet it is real to them.

There might be psychological and medical explanations for these feelings, such as “muscles innervating” (James, 2004, p. 65), but again causation is irrelevant. If one feels it, it is real for them. How deeply a person feels this presence may determine the depth of their faith.

A minister once used the phrase “a God with skin on it” to describe her need at a moment of crisis to perceive that someone, something, was out there to help. In theology, the “God out there” (transcendent) vs. the “God inside” (immanent) is a common debate, but for the vast majority, the former is the very basis of belief. Intellectually one may talk about the God inside, but the human brain at its simplest perception of divinity tends to feel it as a separate presence, according to James.

The feeling that this divine presence is real may be as simple, psychologically, as thoughts passing from the subconscious mind to the conscious mind, creating the perception that it came
from somewhere else. James focused a great deal on the subconscious mind and often called it the key to understanding the mind-God connection.

If one follows his arguments against the relevance of causation, however, that psychological argument is unimportant. A point he makes over and over is that even if medical or psychological theories about these feelings are valid, they are not proofs for or against God. That is to say, he leaves open the possibility that religious emotions may actually be manifestations of the divine. That is, God is expressed in form, and that form is mental formations and emotions. In this way, he suggests, the subconscious mind becomes merely the portal for spirit to enter through.

The more spiritually developed brain may get to a unity of the inside-outside God such that the line becomes invisible, but the default position is to touch the face of God as the “other.” James is respectful of transcendentalist beliefs and of theology, but it is obvious his sensibilities are more with feeling than with thinking, and he even derides rationalism and logic when it comes to spiritual matters.

(Religious emotions) are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experiences can be, and they are, as a rule, much more convincing than results established by mere logic ever are…(Rationalism) has the prestige…it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions…Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths…have prepared the premises…and something in you absolutely knows that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk. [emphasis original] (James, 2004, p. 73-74)

TWO MENTAL PERSPECTIVES: HEALTHY AND MORBID MINDEDNESS

Perhaps the most sought-after human emotion of all, happiness, is not necessarily a religious feeling. But it helps determine which religion a person will choose, according to James. “If a creed makes a man feel happy, he almost inevitably adopts it. Such a belief ought to be true; therefore it is true” for that person (James, 2004, p. 78).

He sees two distinct differences in perspectives in getting to that happiness through religion. One he labels healthy-mindedness. Its followers he calls the once-born, presumably because they see no need to be born-again. It turned out alright the first time. They have a view of evil as error, wrong thinking, or not even worth thinking about. It is to be denied, not as fact, but as relevant to their lives. Charles Fillmore, co-founder of the New Thought movement Unity, which falls under the healthy-mindedness umbrella, explained evil in this way: “Apparent evil is the result of ignorance, and when the truth is presented, the error disappears” (Fillmore, 1946, p. 10).

The other type of religion he calls morbid-mindedness, and its followers he calls the twice-born, which today are called the born-again. Evil to them is inherent in the world and in man. We are intended to fail, and God is there to save us. “Man is a sinner …. [who is in] rebellion against God …. and refuses to admit his ‘creatureliness’ …. [and] pretends to be more than he is” (Niebuhr, p. 16).

Both of these views are of course caricatures, and most faiths fall somewhere in the middle, though many go to the extremes of pessimism or optimism to this very day. One need only compare beliefs from modern healthy-minded churches (e.g., Religious Science and Unity) to
fundamentalist Christianity to see that those stark contrasts still exist. James believes that a person’s psychological makeup will naturally move them towards one or the other.

There are men who seem to have started in life with a bottle or two of champagne inscribed to their credit; whilst others seem to have been born close to the pain-threshold, which the slightest irritants fatally send them over. (James, 2004, p. 125)

THE ONCE-BORN

The once-born looks on all things and sees they are good, and God is a beneficent, loving partner in this bounty. James sees difficulty in the logic of this view when trying to explain away evil, and in the end seems slightly skeptical of the ability of this set of beliefs to help those who are in crisis. When the going gets tough, he seems to suggest, people need a God who’s going to directly battle evil.

He does acknowledge that the once-born are not fools about the existence of evil, they just choose to give it a different explanation and optimistically turn it to their advantage. The phenomenon called evil exists only because of how one looks at things. It’s all about attitude and being open to the world.

If people “Refuse to admit their badness,” says James, “despise their power; ignore their presence…though the facts may still exist, their evil character exists no longer” (James, 2004, p. 87).

There are great, practical fruits in this approach, he concedes, and in fact characterizes it as a religion with great popular potential because of what it promises.

The mind-cure movement, as he names it, is the most practical of the fruits of this faith. He classifies New Thought as part of this movement. Charles Fillmore, a New Thought contemporary of James, taught that through affirmation, belief, meditation, and prayer, the mind could effect physical, mental and spiritual healing.

The affirmation of any good statement of health puts us in conscious contact with the Christ Mind universal and quickens and releases the energy stored up in the subconscious mind, and the process of rejuvenation begins its work. (Fillmore, 1949, p. 101)

James also cites the Gospels and much of the Jesus story in exploring health-mindedness. Who was the greatest mind-cure purveyor if not Jesus himself? It is easy to conveniently ignore this aspect of the New Testament given current skepticism about faith-healers, but his miracles with the disabled can be seen as a manifestation of this practice.

Mind-curers might explain that he did not physically cure them as a doctor might, but instead led them to open their own minds to ultimate faith and connection to the divine, so that they might cure themselves. When a blind man asks Jesus to give him sight, Jesus tells him: “‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road” (Mark 10:52). The man’s own faith cured him, not Jesus or magic.

The resurrection itself, in fact, might be seen as the ultimate mind-cure, regardless of whether one views it metaphysically or as reality. In the real physical sense, through his mental-divine connection, did Jesus transmute his cells to overcome death?

Again, James brings up the subconscious mind as a vehicle of religion. Mind-cure believers, through their affirming tools, stir up the good, or the God, within the subconscious, and bring it
into fruition in the conscious mind. One is already joined with the divine and only needs to touch it and bring it forward from the subconscious mind.

THE TWICE-BORN

The twice-born would scoff at a lot of this, of course. Evil is life’s very essence, it is the flip side of everything. Life can be good, but there is also its constant negation. The emphasis is on the eternal order of things as more important than living in the moment. It is not just a matter of being negative in one’s outlook, but a realistic recognition of what underlies existence.

James lumps all the major traditional religions, including most Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism into this category. Each offers its own stark statement of this reality, though the full theologies are more complex. Buddhism speaks as one of its Noble Truths that all life is suffering, while much of Christianity is based on the concept of original sin as a permanent stain.

This may seem entirely pessimistic in the most extreme sense of the word. Yet, believers see a deeper happiness on the other side of the equation than the ephemeral joys of the once-born. The upside is greater. It is a religion based on redemption, and that salvation results in what he calls “rapturous sorts of happiness” (James, 2004, p. 133).

James characterizes those who seek out this sort of religion as having a certain psychological makeup, where the champagne glass is much less than half full. In fact, he claims neurotic and even pathological tendencies for many of the twice-born, though he is careful not to claim that is true for anything close to the majority. He is merely saying that those who have what he calls “sick souls” will naturally gravitate to a pessimistic view.

“The subject of melancholy,” he says, “is forced in spite of himself to ignore that of all good whatever: for him it may no longer have the least reality” (James, 2004, p. 133). He speaks of those with “sensitiveness and susceptibility to mental pain,” and in more extreme cases, pathological depression, anhedonia (a mild form of passive joylessness and dreariness), panic fear, and self-contempt.

The sufferer, however, because of alienation and a sense of the unreality of things, comes to a deeper questioning, and in turn to a more satisfying religious solution than what the once-born approach could ever offer them. This person will not accept easy answers, or brush off evil as error, but will ask more insistently what it’s all about.

His most famous example of this religious melancholy turned salvation is Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, who wrote in My Confessions that “I could give no reasonable meaning to any actions of my life…One can only live so long as one is intoxicated, drunk with life; but when one grows sober one cannot fail to see that it is all a stupid cheat” (James, 2004, p. 140).

Lest one dismisses the morbid-minded as feeble-minded because of the extremes, Tolstoy claimed he felt at his strongest and clearest ever during his salvation experience. He called his former life “sucking the honey without seeing the dragon … and from such a way … I can learn nothing, after what I know now” (James, 2004, p. 142).

The process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before. (James, 2004, p. 142)
Between the two approaches, James claims morbid-mindedness covers a wider range because it overlaps the two sides of life, good and evil. Optimism works, he states, as long as good dominates in life, but breaks down impotently when melancholy arrives. If one’s constitution is such that sadness never or rarely comes, the positive approach will work. If it does come, one may search for a different God. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about such overly positive viewpoints, “[They are] too generous and optimistic to accord with the known facts of human history” (Niebuhr, p. 122).

THE FRUITS OF RELIGION FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING

Whatever tendency works best for one, the key judgment in James’ view is if it helps one to lead a richer and deeper mental and spiritual life. He places more value in common sense judgments of worth than in any one theology. One chooses their religion by the fruits it bears personally.

One such fruit is what is called unification of the discordant mind. Many individuals develop divided personalities, even if not in the extreme form. He calls this the heterogeneous character, and this can wreak havoc in a person’s mind due to the internal contradiction. As James quotes Saint Paul, “What I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I” (James, 2004, p. 155).

Bringing together the frayed ends of our personality is a very common psychological process. But while not unique to religion, it is a central tenet of religious psychology, in that the whole point of religion is to seek unity, not only within one’s self, but also with the divine.

Unification of this divided self is for some a gradual process, a pensive and even peaceful journey (mostly for the once-born, says James). For others, it is a rough awakening, as often happens in conversions for the second born. Whatever method the personality chooses, and whether one is healthy- or morbid-minded, the key is a sense of surrender, and James comes back to the subconscious mind as the instigator.

There are always subconscious maturing processes at work, what psychologists call unconscious cerebration. The subject may or may not be aware of this subconscious change. James notes that for those who are most unaware, those who have a rich subconscious life, the change can seem most sudden, and indeed may give the feeling that it has been put there miraculously by God or his agent.

Does God work through the subconscious mind, or is that the construct one gives it because of previous conditioning and common labels? James, as with all his points about religious psychology, does not see this process as proof for or against the divine. He simply offers an explanation of the psychological process.

Self-surrender is the key aspect of subconscious religious conversions. The personal will must be given up, especially at the last moment. Because of conscious mind resistance, much of the work by its very nature is left to the subconscious, behind the back of the waking mind so to speak.

In the depths of melancholy or even despair, the mind looks for a lifesaver. James notes that conscious influences work as a sort of fire stoker, and this is where agents such as embedded theology and religious institutions have their greatest impact. Still, in the end it is up to the individual mind to surrender to its rescuer.

Something snaps, and one is left with a feeling of higher control by what is often perceived as an outside, unexplainable power. One is no longer abandoned. Redemption from melancholy is
given as a gift; i.e., grace through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. This feeling of salvation from despair speaks to the downtrodden and is one reason for the appeal of Jesus’ story to many in need.

The once-born may find this all fantastic, and counter that all the work of redemption is really done within, that the feeling of outer salvation is illusionary, a result of a sort of brainwashing. This may be, but it behooves progressive religions to at least understand the psychological underpinnings of the process.

Positive emotions result from this redemptive process. Worry is gone, and there is harmony inside and with others. All this comes about because of surrender to a certainty of divine grace. There is also, for many, a perception of humble wisdom, a belief that all that was cloudy is now clear, as if some great secret had been revealed.

All of this all can change a person’s character for the better. Such moral betterment is one of the goals of institutionalized religions and is why societies depend on them as a civilizing influence. Religion has shown itself much more adept at this than moralistic philosophies, according to James.

SAINTLINESS AND FANATICISM

James terms saintliness as the ripest fruits of religion in character. He uses a number of case studies, primarily Catholic saints, as examples of the highest form of religious character improvement. But he is also not shy about pointing out the extremes to which many of them have gone. He shows how religious beliefs can sometimes do more mental harm than good.

Saints find positive pleasure in self-surrender and sacrifice, as a way to demonstrate loyalty to a higher power. James approves of a certain measure of this, as building hardiness and temperance in a soft modern world.

Purity—and by this is meant not just chastity, but avoidance of distraction and harmful stimulation of all types—can help those with a severe sensitivity to the discord of life. Many religious traditions practice a contemplative and prayerful silence, as a way to distance one from temporal concerns and to breed a deeper and truer connection to both the inner and outer.

Another saintly fruit is greater charity and tenderness towards all creatures, perhaps most typified by Saint Francis of Assisi. There is great bravery and disregard of personal safety, not in self-flagellation, but in selflessness. Martyrdom is the greatest example, according to James, and death is welcomed with utter joy. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “The martyr cannot be dishonored. Every lash inflicted is a tongue of fame; every prison a more illustrious abode” (Emerson, p. 103).

Each aspect of saintliness, of course, can be glorified or abused, as corruptions of excess. Purity becomes extreme self-deprivation of all sensory experiences. Mortifications show aspects of pathological personalities, according to James.

Devoutness when unbalanced becomes fanaticism. James terms it, “jealousy for the deity’s honor … [a] partisan temper” (James, 2004, p. 299) that can become aggressive.

Fanaticism is, of course, organized religion’s greatest sin, the first thing many point to in rejecting religion. History’s litany is too easy: The Crusades, the Catholic-Protestant wars, the Inquisition, 9-11. An only slightly more moderate version of it is spoken in many churches, temples and mosques to this day.
But in the end, says James, the best of the saints—and that includes those less exalted by churches, those who live every day among us—are a necessary leaven, prophets of future human development of character. They bring us up a notch, even as they are ridiculed for not living in “the real world.” Without them as leaders and examples, our spiritual development might never advance.

THE DIVINE-MIND CONNECTION IN FULL MANIFESTATION

We experience God through our psychology. There is no other way for a human being to experience the divine, because it is through the mind that our perceptions come to realization. God may come through an individual’s fingers, skin, eyes, and senses, but it is the mental formations that create the picture of God.

There are thoughts, feelings and emotions of God, conversions both gradual and sudden, changes in character that are the fruits. These are all common ways to perceive and sense God, but James says there are two ways which offer much more direct communications between the human mind and the divine. These are: Mystical experiences and prayer.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

The word mystic conjures up images of saints in trances, of medieval hermits with long beards or modern crackpots hearing voices or speaking in tongues. What is not recognized is that regular people have mystical experiences, perhaps even on a daily basis.

Experiences can be as simple and fleeting as a feeling of momentary bliss. There is a surrender to what is in that very moment. Thought disappears, and one is part of everything, the ultimate unity. It can be a transcendent moment in nature, or that floating few seconds in a deep meditation.

It is a moment of understanding of the true nature of God, existence, and eternity. James quotes the Sufi mystic Gulshan-Raz about this “secret”, “In his divine majesty, the me, the we, the thou, are not found, for in the One there can be no distinction” [emphasis original] (James, 2004, p. 365). Intellectually and theologically, this is not a novel idea, but the difference is that the mystic feels this oneness emotionally and even physically, not simply intellectually.

James sees mysticism as the most direct revelation of God in the mind, a breaking down of barriers to the divine. It was something he and others of his time were fascinated by, and as mentioned earlier, even sought to experience through unorthodox methods.

He defines mysticism by four marks. One is ineffability, meaning it is hard or impossible to explain to someone else (James, 2004, p. 329). It is an individual’s experience. Second, it has a noetic quality, in that some sort of new insight is imparted to the individual involved. It can be as simple as “God is good,” or “I am part of something greater.”

Third is transiency, in that there are rarely prolonged mystical incidents. Again, a moment is the most common length, though some may feel it for a longer period of time. Lastly, there is passivity, in that it cannot be brought on voluntarily. That is not to say that one cannot set the
conditions for it. Meditation and prayer will help make it possible. But in the end, in the moment, it comes only because of a non-volitional complete surrender of will.

James saw it as a shame that most of one’s life is spent within the waking or rational consciousness, instead of in mystical experiences. He encouraged attempts to break through the wall surrounding the working mind, even to the point of promoting controlled experiments with anesthetics as a legitimate way to study the phenomenon. He noted that many traditional societies, including Native Americans with peyote, had used outside means to reach God.

Many psychologists, he acknowledged, are skeptical of such states of mind. They are mere dream states, imitative hypnotic trances, encouraged by superstition or brought on by the chemical changes of drugs or alcohol.

But James rejected these criticisms and had great respect for mysticism as perhaps the greatest fruit of religious experience. He noted that the best of the Catholic Spanish mystics, such as Saint Ignatius, were anything but addled, were not removed from practical life, and were indeed intellectual powerhouses.

Frequent mystic incidents can bring on a deep optimism about life, because one comes to understand life’s true nature. The greatest gift is to become one with that nature.

Like his theory of saints serving as leaven to break down harsher elements, he points to the mystic, and mystical moments, as necessary arguments against the dominance of rationalism. The experience, he notes, carries deep authority for the individual in the midst of it, and for no one else. But the fact of its very happening, the frequency with which it happens, helps break down the dictatorship of logic that sometimes blocks the divine.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

If mysticism is a surrendered, passive opening to the divine, says James, prayer is a more active communication with God, and is in fact the very essence of spiritual life.

Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion…(It is) no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formula, but 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. (James, 2004, p. 400)

He is not talking about petitional prayer, such as praying for good weather or a car. While he does not see it as beneficial to selfishly or cynically pray for something good to happen, he does believe that prayer can have real results in the physical world. He does not claim any answers as to why it does, except to hint that it has something to do with the depth of faith felt during the prayer. Perhaps it is only through genuine, humble communication with the divine that one removes blocks to what is meant to happen. All other type of prayer is false, and the divine will know that.

One long case study he presents in his chapter on prayer is about a man, a George Muller of Bristol, whose whole life purpose is to build and run more orphanages, but is with limited resources. He is an optimist of the extreme sort, who prays every day in a joyful way, completely free of any doubt, that the day’s food or monies to pay bills will somehow arrive. Astonishingly, day after day, year after year, this happens.
On the surface, the man seems a simpleton, and his prayer petitional. However, his prayer is actually more akin to Biblical prayers of utter, unquestioning faith. The parable here seems to be that prayer in faith actively opens doors. “Go; it shall be done for you as you have believed” (Matthew 8:13). Mr. Muller’s prayers are answered because he believes they will be.

James holds that true spiritual work is really effected in such prayer. It is an inward communion with the divine, much more sustained than mystical moments. It is the point of spiritual existence and brings God actively into one’s life.

**IS THERE A GOD, OR JUST A GOD OF THE MIND?**

Though he was very much a religious philosopher himself, and not at all dismissive of theology, James emphasized the importance of personal religion. True religion, he believed, goes beyond theology and ecclesiastical structures. On a personal level, religion is consciousness of a direct connection to a higher power, either through mystical experience or the inner dialogue of prayer.

At the end of *Varieties*, James addresses the question of the nature and existence of God, but it is not the point of the Lectures. He presents an entire chapter titled “Philosophy” in which he critiques a number of theological or philosophical arguments seeking to either prove God’s existence, or explain God in a way that all people can agree on. His conclusion on the matter is that many such theories are riddled with failed logic and carry few universal agreements, if any.

*Varieties* has sometimes been called a book on the science of religion, but the author himself is skeptical of the possibility or value of such a field. He narrows down to a very few points what this science might agree on: 1) The visible world is part of a more significant spiritual universe; 2) Union with that higher universe is our true end; 3) Prayer or inner communion with this universe, whether one calls it God or spirit or natural law, is the true work of religion, and produces effects, “psychological or material” within the real world; 4) This work can have as its main effects on individuals: a new zest for life including positive changes to personalities, an assurance of safety, a temper of peace, a preponderance of loving affections towards others (James, 2004, p. 418).

Even with that narrow a list, he is skeptical of his own “scientific” conclusions. He urges us, as he has done, to instead study the different types of religion and spirituality so that one may better understand human belief, instead of trying to fit God into logical definitions.

As such, there are as many variations on what God is, as there are minds. There is no common mind, and so there is no common view of divinity. There may be beliefs from organized religions shared by millions or billions, but James characterizes these as relatively insignificant “over-beliefs.”

These over-beliefs may shape one’s rituals and outer forms of prayer, but in the end, it’s an inside game. The outer influences may be strong, but one’s own mind, one’s own psychological makeup, will lead to the God of personal choice.

One objection to James’ theory might be the nature vs. nurture debate in psychology. What if a person of healthy-minded temperament is born into a strong morbid-minded environment. Would they still choose the healthy-minded path? James seems to suggest that if they were in such a situation, restrictive influences would steer them towards the unnatural choice, and they would suffer for it. It would go against their grain.
Any such attempts by societies or religious institutions to enforce inner conformity are doomed to ultimate failure. This is because all humans have different difficulties, temperaments, conditions. All Gods are different as a result. Each individual makes the God they need. As the title of James’ book suggests, he does not disapprove of this diversity. It is not a bad thing to have so many inside Gods, or even outside Gods.

If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. (James, 2004, p. 420).

So then, if diversity creates so many Gods, is it just a God of each mind? James answers this question psychologically, in that private phenomena are concrete actualities to each individual. Simply put, if God is real to one’s mind, it is real.

As he further explains it, “(S)o long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term” (emphasis original) (James, 2004, p. 428).

He continues, expounding on the power of personal experience over any abstract theories:

A concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience…It is a full fact, even though it be an insignificant fact; it is of the kind to which all realities whatsoever must belong…That unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately feels it rolling out on fortune’s wheel may be disparaged for its egotism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality, and any would-be existent that should lack such a feeling, or its analogue, would be a piece of reality only half made up. (James, 2004, p. 429).

James is a bold defender against any critics of anyone else’s religious thoughts or feelings or beliefs. One can objectively study how individuals are all at different levels of spirituality, such as modern theories of spiral dynamics do, but one has no right to judge anyone else’s view of what God is. It is their God, and they will bear the fruits or ills of that God.

James does not even see God as the most important aspect of spiritual life. He asks:

Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse. (James, 2004, p. 435).

In his last pages, James gives his own personal view of God, but clearly labels it as such. His own religion favors the morbid-minded God. Part of his reasoning, he explains, is that its logic takes in a wider range of human experience. He cannot completely accept the reasonableness of healthy-mindedness. He also admits to his own over-beliefs, that actual “divine facts” exist, a very real spiritual universe that is separate from our own (James, 2004, p. 444). He does not claim to know what that universe consists of, he just knows it is there, and it gives him personal comfort.
While James does not go into personal details, it is interesting that he struggled with his own depression and illness, making himself a good case study for the morbid-minded believer.

This is of course James’ own personal God. He does not define God for us, nor does he affirm or deny God’s existence. Each of us, each of our minds, must work on this problem alone.
Bibliography


