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PERSONAL RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* describe the general focus of the lectures. They are titled “Religion and Neurology,” “Circumscription of the Topic,” and “The Reality of the Unseen.” I will begin this chapter with James’s explanation in the first two chapters of how he intends to address the subject of religion and the rationale he offers for his decision to focus on personal religious experiences. Then I will take up the third chapter and cite several of the personal religious experiences he presents in support of his view that a fundamental aspect of personal religious experience is the sense of the presence of God.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY AND EVALUATION OF RELIGIOUS PROPENSITIES

James begins the first chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*—“Religion and Neurology”—with the confession that it is “with no small amount of trepidation that I take my place behind this desk, and face this learned audience,” for “to us Americans, the experience of receiving instruction from the living voice as well as from the books of European scholars, is very familiar.”¹ He suggests that the natural thing for Americans is to listen while the Europeans talk and the contrary habit of talking while Europeans listen is not one that Americans have yet acquired. Yet he expresses the hope that as years go by, many of his own countrymen will be asked, as he has been asked, to lecture in the Scottish Universities of Aberdeen and

1. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1.

Edinburgh so that “our people may become in all these higher matters even as one people; and that the peculiar philosophic temperament, as well as the peculiar political temperament, that goes with our English speech may more and more pervade and influence the world.”²

As for the manner in which he will administer the lectureship, he acknowledges that he is “neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religion, nor an anthropologist.”³ In fact, “Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particular versed.”⁴ But this is no reason for avoiding the subject of religion. In fact, “to the psychologist the religious propensities must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution. It would seem, therefore, that, as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of these religious propensities.”⁵ If, however, “the inquiry be psychological,” then “not religious institutions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography.”⁶

He notes that if he were a historian or anthropologist of religion, it is likely that he would pay greater attention to the origins of the religious propensities of man, but the very fact that he is a psychologist means that he needs to take a different approach, one that may be equally interesting if not more so. For “interesting as the origins and early stages of a subject always are, yet when one seeks earnestly for its full significance, one must always look to its more completely evolved and perfect forms. It follows from this that the documents that will most concern us will be those of the men who were most accomplished in the religious life and best able to give an intelligible account of their ideas and motives. These men, of course, are either comparatively modern writers, or else such earlier ones as have become religious classics.”⁷

This does not mean, however, that he will be focusing on learned theological texts. On the contrary, “the *documents humains* which we shall find most instructive need not then be sought for in the haunts of special erudition—they lie along the beaten highway; and this circumstance, which flows so naturally from the character of our problem, suits admirably also

2. Ibid., 2.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 2–3.

6. Ibid., 3.

7. Ibid.

your lecturer's lack of special theological training. I may take my citations, my sentences and paragraphs of personal confession, from books that most of you at some time will have had already in your hands, and yet this will be no detriment to the value of my conclusions."⁸

But what, after all, are the religious propensities? And what is their significance? These, he believes, are two distinct questions, and it is important that we recognize this. The first question seeks to get at the nature of the thing and this usually involves learning about how it came into existence, its origin, and its history. The second question seeks to understand its importance, meaning, significance, or value. The latter, he notes, cannot be deduced from the former, and in any case it is vital that we give appropriate attention to the latter, for the existential facts are insufficient in themselves for determining the value of a religious expression or experience. In effect, determining their value is a spiritual problem and is one that calls for spiritual judgment. On the other hand, James is fully aware of the fact that because his listeners know that he is a psychologist they will suspect that he will treat the value question from a narrow biological or psychological perspective and view religious experiences as if they are mere curious factors of individual history.

James wants to assure his listeners that it is not his intent "to discredit the religious side of life," that, in fact, such a result is "absolutely alien" to his intentions. This being the case, he feels that he needs to say something more about this suspicion, especially because he will be focusing in these lectures on those persons whose pursuit of the religious life is such that it often becomes not only exceptional but also eccentric. James is not speaking here of the ordinary religious believer who follows the conventional observances of his religious tradition, whether Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, etc. Rather, he has in mind those who have been "pattern-setters," individuals "for whom religion exists not as a dull habit but as an acute fever," and they have often shown signs of nervous instability. Frequently, they "have been subject to abnormal psychical visitations" and have "led a discordant inner life, and had melancholy during a part of their career."⁹ Also, they have "been liable to obsessions and fixed ideas" and "have fallen into trances, heard voices, seen visions, and presented all sorts of peculiarities which are ordinarily classed as pathological." Moreover, "these pathological features in their career have often helped to give them their religious authority and influence."¹⁰

8. Ibid. See also Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*.

9. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 6–7.

10. Ibid., 7.

For a concrete example, James cites the case of George Fox, founder of the Quaker religion. He notes that in a day of shams this “was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England.”¹¹ Also, “no one can pretend for a moment that in point of spiritual sagacity and capacity, Fox’s mind was unsound.”¹² In fact, everyone who confronted him personally, from Oliver Cromwell to county magistrates and jailers, seems to have acknowledged his superior power. And yet, “from the point of view of his nervous constitution, George Fox was a psychopath or *détraqué* of the deepest dye.”¹³ James cites in this regard a passage in Fox’s journal in which he tells about how the Lord commanded him to remove his shoes, enter the city of Lichfield, and cry with a loud voice, “Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!” Fox continued walking, and as he entered the marketplace, there seemed to him to be a channel of blood running down the streets. Later, he learned that under the Emperor Diocletian a thousand Christians were martyred in Lichfield and that by walking barefoot through the channel of their blood he had raised up the memorial of their blood.¹⁴

James notes that because we are studying religions’ existential conditions, “we cannot possibly ignore these pathological aspects of the subject. We must describe and name them just as if they occurred in non-religious men.”¹⁵ To be sure, there is something offensive about the association of Fox’s religious experience with what we know to be pathological experiences, especially because “any object that is infinitely important to us and awakens our devotion feels to us also as if it must be *sui generis* and unique,” and “probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. ‘I am no such thing,’ it would say; ‘I am MYSELF, MYSELF

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 7–8. Throughout the book, I will be treating James’s use of material from the autobiographical writings of other authors as case material (similar to what one finds in psychotherapeutic texts) because in many cases the quoted material from these personal documents is several pages in length. Therefore, despite the fact that this material appears in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, I will not represent it as quotations by James himself. This eliminates the need to present this material within single quotation marks. On the other hand, the footnotes will indicate the page numbers on which this material appears in *The Varieties* and the title and author of the original text. In most cases, the case material as presented here will be substantially reduced and much of it will be rewritten in the interests of brevity.

15. Ibid., 9.

alone.”¹⁶ On the other hand, James is necessarily engaged here in an intellectual enterprise, and the first thing the intellect does with an object is to class it along with something else, and this, it would seem, is unavoidable. However, he wants to assure his listeners that in demonstrating the association of a religious experience like the one that George Fox describes in his journal to a pathological state, his intention is not to discredit it. Instead, he will be concerned with the question of the meaning, significance, and value of these religious experiences.

James goes on to note that another way that the intellect tends to discredit a religious experience “is to lay bare the causes in which the thing originates.”¹⁷ To explain how this works he cites the French literary critic and historian Hippolyte Taine’s statement in the introduction to his history of English literature: “Whether facts be moral or physical, it makes no matter. They always have their causes. There are causes for ambition, courage, veracity, just as there are for digestion, muscular movement, animal heat.”¹⁸ James notes that where religion is concerned, those who are religious or have positive feelings toward religion tend to resent this procedure because they feel that spiritual value is undone if its origins are identified.

Common examples of this approach are the comments that unsentimental people make about the religious interests and perspectives of their more sentimental acquaintances. They say that “Alfred believes in immortality so strongly because his temperament is so emotional. Fanny’s extraordinary conscientiousness is merely a matter of over-instigated nerves. William’s melancholy about the universe is due to bad digestion—probably his liver is torpid. Eliza’s delight in her church is a symptom of her hysterical condition. Peter would be less troubled about his soul if he would take more exercise in the open air, etc.”¹⁹ James adds that a more fully developed

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 10. It is noteworthy that James uses his own name—William—in the example of a person whose melancholy about the universe is attributed to bad digestion due to the sluggish functioning of the liver. As we saw in chapter 1, and will discuss in more detail in chapter 4, James had a debilitating experience of melancholy when he was in his late twenties. He does not, of course, endorse the idea that his melancholy was due to poor digestion due to torpidity of the liver, but it is worth noting that in his article “The Liver as the Seat of the Soul” Morris Jastrow Jr. discusses the ancients’ (including the early Israelites’) belief that the soul is located in the liver. Jastrow notes that the liver was also considered the organ through which the gods spoke, a belief that supported divination practices: e.g., priests cutting open the belly of a sheep or goat and reading the markings on the animal’s liver. However, Richard Selzer points out in *Mortal Lessons* that with “the separation of medicine from the apron strings of religion and the rise of anatomy as a study in itself, the liver was toppled from its central role

example of the same kind of reasoning is the fashion, quite common these days, of criticizing the religious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual life: “Conversion is a crisis of puberty and adolescence,” and “the macerations of saints, and the devotion of missionaries, are only instances of the parental instinct of self-sacrifice gone astray,” and for the hysterical nun who is starving for natural life “Christ is but an imaginary substitute for a more earthly object of affection.”²⁰ We are “all familiar in a general way with this method of discrediting states of mind for which we have an antipathy,” and we all “use it to some degree in criticizing persons whose states of mind we regard as overstrained.”²¹ But when other people criticize “our own more exalted soul-flights by calling them ‘nothing but’ expressions of our organic disposition, we feel outraged and hurt, for we know that whatever be our organism’s peculiarities, our mental states have their substantive value as revelations of the living truth.”²²

Suggesting that “medical materialism” is a good term for the simple-minded thinking that these examples illustrate, James notes that “medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as a hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as a hereditary degenerate. George Fox’s discontent with the shams of his age, and his pinning for spiritual veracity it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon.”²³ In its supposition that all such mental overtensions are mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably) due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover, such an employment of medical materialism would lead to the claim that the spiritual authority of all

and the heart was elevated” (65). Selzer notes that from its beginnings Christianity was a religion of the heart. Moreover, it transformed the earlier barbaric rituals—such as eating the slain enemy’s heart as a means of taking upon oneself his strength, valor and skill—into a more spiritualized form, such as the adoration of the heart of a saint. In Capps, *A Time to Laugh* I note that the belief that the soul is in the liver was based on the fact that the liver is self-regenerative, and I cite Selzer’s reference to the case of Prometheus and the liver transplants carried out in the 1990s in which the liver adapted itself to the recipient’s body; the liver’s return to its normal size following cessation of alcohol abuse is another example of the liver’s ability to adapt. I also proposed a psychophysical model of the human person (ibid. 103–12), composed of the soul (located in the liver), the spirit (located in the heart), and the self (located in the brain). The rationale for locating the self in the brain is that the self has to do with identity, and identity is based on memory. To illumine the spirit/soul distinction, I drew on Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology*, 68–69; and Hillman, “Peaks and Vales.”

20. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

21. Ibid., 10–11.

22. Ibid., 11–12.

23. Ibid., 13.

such personages has been successfully undermined.²⁴ Moreover, modern psychology, assuming that the dependence of mental states on bodily conditions is thoroughgoing and complete, might not endorse this application of medical materialism in every detail yet agree that its claims are true in a general sort of way.

But for James this raises the critical question: “How can such an existential account of facts of mental history decide in one way or another on their spiritual significance?”²⁵ After all, a general postulate of psychology is that there is not a single one of our states of mind, high or low, healthy or morbid, that has not some organic process as its condition, and this means that all of our states of mind are “equally organically founded, be they of religious or non-religious content.”²⁶ Thus, “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.”²⁷ In fact, to be consistent, one would also have to conclude that “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.”²⁸

James adds, however, that in point of fact medical materialism does not draw such a sweeping, skeptical conclusion, for it “is sure, just as every simple man is sure, that some states of mind are inwardly superior to others, and reveal to us more truth, and in this it simply makes use of an ordinary spiritual judgment.”²⁹ On the other hand, there have been instances in which medical materialism has attempted to “discredit the states which it dislikes by vaguely associating them with nerves and liver, and connecting them with names connoting bodily affliction.”³⁰ In doing so, medical materialism has been “altogether illogical and inconsistent.”³¹

Thus, James makes clear that he will not engage in any effort to discredit personal religious experiences, ideas, or claims on physiological grounds. In

24. Ibid. James cites an article by Charles Binet-Sanglé as a “first-rate example” of this type of reasoning; Binet-Sanglé’s *La Folie de Jésus*, in which he argued that Jesus experienced hallucinations, was his most controversial work. *Diathesis* means “a predisposition to certain diseases,” and antointoxications are toxic substances generated within the body. See Agnes, *Webster’s New World*, 399, 96.

25. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 14.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 14–15.

30. Ibid., 15.

31. Ibid.

fact, he suggests that persons who engage in this kind of argument are likely to have formed a dislike for these religious expressions on other grounds and are merely invoking the physiological argument to support their previously formed opinions. James notes, however, that in the natural sciences and industrial arts “it never occurs to anyone to try to refute opinions by showing up their author’s neurotic constitution.”³² Instead, opinions are invariably tested by logic and experiment no matter what their author’s neurological type may be, and it “should be no otherwise with religious opinions.”³³ These too should be judged exclusively on their value, and this “can only be ascertained by spiritual judgments directly passed upon them, judgments based on our own immediate feeling primarily; and secondarily on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true.”³⁴

In his view, the only available criteria for judging their value are *immediate luminousness*, *philosophical reasonableness*, and *moral helpfulness*. He observes in this connection that Saint Teresa might have had the nervous system of the most placid cow, but this would not have saved her theology if it did not meet these basic criteria. Conversely, if her theology can stand these other tests, “it will make no difference how hysterical or nervously off her balance Saint Teresa may have been when she was with us here below.”³⁵

PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION

In chapter 2 of *The Varieties*—“Circumscription of the Topic”—James says that because “the field of religion is as wide as it is, it is manifestly impossible that I should pretend to cover it.”³⁶ Therefore, his lectures “must be limited to a fraction of the subject.”³⁷ He also notes that it would be foolish to set up an abstract definition of *religion* and then attempt to defend it against all comers. On the other hand, this should not prevent him from taking his own narrow point of view of religion “for the purpose of these lectures, or, out of the many meanings of the word, from choosing the one meaning in which I wish to interest you particularly, and proclaiming arbitrarily that when I say ‘religion’ I mean *that*.”³⁸

32. *Ibid.*, 17.

33. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

34. *Ibid.*, 18.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 28.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

One useful way to do this is to indicate what aspects of religion he intends to consider and what aspects he intends to leave out. He notes that there is one “great partition that divides the religious field,” the *institutional* and the *personal*.³⁹ Central to the former are “worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization”; and central to the latter are “the inner dispositions of man himself,” including “his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness.”⁴⁰ In the former, gaining the favor of the deity is central. In the latter, the favor of the deity “is an essential feature of the story, and theology plays a vital part therein, yet the acts to which this sort of religion prompts are personal not ritual acts, the individual transacts the business by himself alone, and the ecclesiastical organization, with its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place. The relation goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker.”⁴¹

Thus, James proposes to “ignore the institutional branch entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion.”⁴² He acknowledges that to some listeners “personal religion, thus nakedly considered, will no doubt seem too incomplete a thing to wear the general name,” and that it doesn’t even warrant the name “religion,” for in their view “the name ‘religion’ should be reserved for the fully organized system of feeling, thought, and institution, for the Church, in short, of which this personal religion so called, is but a fractional element.”⁴³ His response to this point is that it simply illustrates the fact that “the question of definition tends to become a dispute about names,”⁴⁴ and rather than prolong the dispute he is willing to accept almost any name for the personal religion that he intends to discuss in these lectures. If his listeners would prefer to call it conscience or morality, this is acceptable to him for it is no less worthy of study under these names. On the other hand, the word *morality* does not convey all of what he intends to speak about in these lectures, so he will employ the word “religion,” and then, in the final concluding lecture, he will say something about the relations between personal religion as discussed in the lectures

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 29.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid., 30.

and “the theologies and ecclesiasticisms” that he will not be discussing in these lectures.⁴⁵

Next, he invokes the origins procedure in support of his decision to focus on personal religion, noting that in one sense “personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism.”⁴⁶ This is because churches once established “live at second-hand upon tradition,” whereas “the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct communication with the divine.”⁴⁷ This, however, is not only true of the founders of the major historical religions but also of the founders of Christian sects. Thus even to those who consider it incomplete, “personal religion” is still “the primordial thing.”⁴⁸

This discussion leads him to propose the definition of *religion* that will inform his lectures: “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”⁴⁹ He adds that inasmuch as the relation to whatever one considers the divine “may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.”⁵⁰ However, as he has already said, in these lectures, “the immediate personal experiences will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticisms at all.”⁵¹

James goes on to suggest that there are understandings of religious experience incompatible with what he has in mind here, and he notes in particular that he accepts the view of common men that religious experience

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid. James acknowledges that other things in religion are chronologically more primordial than personal religion, such as fetishism and magic, and this would mean “that personal religion in the inward sense and the genuinely spiritual ecclesiasticisms which it founds are phenomena of secondary or even tertiary order” (ibid.). However, he notes that many anthropologists distinguish “magic” from “religion,” and that “the whole system of thought which leads to magic, fetishism, and the lower superstitions may just as well be called primitive science as called primitive religion” (ibid., 31). But this simply introduces another potential dispute about names. Also “our knowledge of all these early stages of thought and feeling is in any case so conjectural and imperfect that farther discussion would not be worthwhile” (ibid.).

49. Ibid., 31 (italics original).

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

signifies “a *serious* state of mind.”⁵² Thus it precludes vain chatter, smart wit, and even light irony. On the other hand, it excludes heavy grumbling and complaint. Thus:

There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse. It is precisely as being *solemn* experiences that I wish to interest you in religious experiences. So I propose—arbitrarily again, if you please—to narrow our definition once more by saying that the word “divine,” as employed therein, shall mean for us not merely the primal and enveloping and real, for that meaning if taken without restriction might well prove too broad. The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.⁵³

He recognizes, however, that there could be some controversy over the word *divine*, especially if we take it in too narrow a sense. He notes for example that Buddhism is considered religious even though it does not positively assume a God, and he cites Ralph Waldo Emerson’s view of the universe as having “a divine soul of order, which soul is moral, being also the soul within the soul of man.”⁵⁴ But whether this soul of the universe is a mere quality like the eye’s brilliancy or the skin’s softness, or whether it is a self-conscious life like the eye’s seeing or the skin’s feeling “is a decision that never unmistakably appears in Emerson’s pages.”⁵⁵ Rather, “it quivers on the boundary of these things, sometimes leaning one way, sometimes the other, to suit the literary rather than the philosophical need.”⁵⁶

But since these religious expressions have the same appeal and response found in Christianity and other religious faiths, there is no reason to exclude them from the definition of religion that he is employing here. Rather, “when in our definition of religion we speak of the individual’s relation to ‘what he considers the divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete deity or not.”⁵⁷

52. *Ibid.*, 37.

53. *Ibid.*, 38.

54. *Ibid.*, 33. Emerson, *Miscellanies*, 120; and Emerson, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, 186.

55. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 33.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 34.

It is clear from the foregoing that James intends his definition of *religion* to be a working definition for the purpose of the lectures. The question of course is whether personal religion can be “thus nakedly considered.”⁵⁸ One way of answering this question is to read what James has written and to make a judgment as to whether he succeeded in this endeavor. Some readers of his text have pointed out that the very language that individuals use to describe their experiences of apprehending God is itself derived from the ecclesiastical and theological traditions, which he has “arbitrarily” excluded, and they note that the religious experiences recorded in *The Varieties* illustrate this very fact.

For example, the conversion account by Stephen H. Bradley, which comes at the very beginning of James’s initial lecture on “Conversion” is replete with Christian theological terms (*Savior, Holy Spirit*, and the like) and is understood by Bradley himself to be similar to the experiences of the first apostles on the Day of Pentecost. Furthermore, while Bradley’s personal religious experience occurred in solitude, it was triggered by his having attended church earlier that evening. Thus for Bradley the experience derives its meaning from a specific theological and ecclesiastical context and cannot be understood apart from it. If James separates the personal and the institutional branches of religion, many of the individuals who populate his text do not. For them, absent the institutional branch, they have no way of attributing meaning or significance to their religious experiences. There is no other way to authenticate these experiences.

What are we to make of this objection to James’s whole project? I suggest that we may do one of two things: On the one hand, we may take the view that what James has tried to keep separate—the personal and the institutional—cannot be treated separately. In taking this view we may actually claim James’s own ostensible support for it as he himself says that his division of the two aspects of religion is an arbitrary one for the purpose of these lectures only.

On the other hand, we may take the view that James seems to have taken in his own life, that an individual may be able to be “religious” in the purely personal sense of the term and to do so without the assistance of the institutional branch of religion. In his discussion of Saint Teresa in his lecture on the value of saintliness he notes that she “had a powerful intellect,” wrote “admirable descriptive psychology,” possessed a will “equal to any emergency,” had “a great talent for politics and business, a buoyant disposition, and a first-rate literary style.”⁵⁹ He adds that others have been

58. *Ibid.*, 29.

59. *Ibid.*, 346.

moved by the fact that she “put her whole life at the service of her religious ideals.”⁶⁰ And yet, he cannot avoid the feeling that it was a pity “that so much vitality of soul should have found such poor employment,” i.e., in her life in the convent.⁶¹ Later, he cites Saint Teresa’s mystical experiences in his lectures on mysticism, and here it is clear that he has a deep respect for her own account of how such experiences contribute to “the formation of a new center of spiritual energy.”⁶² Thus, although he recognizes that some mystical experiences may not be authentic, his uneasiness regarding Saint Teresa’s religious “employments” do not apply to her personal religious experiences but to her dedication to the institutional branch of religion. He clearly believes that her religious life exemplified the very priority that he is giving in these lectures to the personal over the institutional branch of religion.

On the other hand, as noted, he recognizes that others may not have similar feelings to his own about her dedication to the convent, and it is clear that he is not trying to change their minds in this regard. Rather, his primary concern is to make a case for the value and validity of personal religion—that is, the religious experiences of the individual—and not to treat them as inferior to the institutional forms and expressions of religion. Thus, in his concluding lecture he challenges the view so common to the sciences of his day that the experiences of individuals are of no concern, that only the aggregate matters. As he points out:

Religion makes no such blunder. The individual’s religion may be egotistic, and those private realities which it keeps in touch with may be narrow enough; but at any rate it always remains infinitely less hollow and abstract, as far as it goes, than a science which prides itself on taking no account of anything private at all . . . By being religious we establish ourselves in possession of ultimate reality as the only points at which reality is given us to guard. Our responsible concern is with our private destiny, after all.⁶³

To be “privately religious” assumes that one may not be a regular participant in rituals and other group activities and therefore that one’s personal religious experiences may have minimal if any connection to any ecclesiastical context. It also means that one may not use theological language or the language of any established religious tradition to describe and interpret the personal experiences that one takes to be “religious.” The question, then, is

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*, 346–47.

62. *Ibid.*, 414.

63. *Ibid.*, 500–501.

whether religion may in fact be an entirely individual matter, unrelated to and disconnected from any and all religious traditions?

The illustrations that he employs in *The Varieties* seem to provide overwhelming evidence against this idea. Virtually every account of personal religious experience included in his book appears to support the counter thesis that there is no purely personal religious experience, that all religious experiences are related in one way or another to religious traditions, drawing on their systems of ideas and beliefs, their social and communal aspects, or both. In fact, as we will see in chapter 3, James's own experience of melancholy (which is reported anonymously in *The Varieties*) draws on the religious tradition in which he was raised. On the other hand, it does so in a way that supports his own view that one may have a purely personal religious experience, an experience that is essentially disconnected—in the mind of the person who has this experience—from theological and ecclesiastical systems and from social and communal aspects of religion. In other words, the experience is not mediated by or through these other influences and channels. All this is to say that some personal religious experiences are so personal that one does not perceive them to be related, other than in an incidental way, to the religious institutions and the theologies that these institutions embrace and promote. To be sure, the connections between these personal experiences and their institutional influences can be teased out and demonstrated, but doing so is likely to obscure the very fact that the experiences occur to individuals “in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”⁶⁴

James's response to a questionnaire on religious experience helps to clarify the distinction that I am suggesting here. In 1904, two years after the publication of *The Varieties*, he filled out a questionnaire sent out by Professor James B. Pratt of Williams College.⁶⁵ Pratt, who had been a student of James's at Harvard, went on to write several books in the psychology of religion.⁶⁶ In a brief paragraph at the top of the questionnaire, Pratt explains its purpose:

It is being realized as never before that religion, as one of the most important things in the life both of the community and of the individual, deserves close and extended study. Such study

64. *Ibid.*, 31.

65. James, *Writings, 1902–1910*, 1183–85. Originally published in Henry James, *The Letters of William James*.

66. Pratt, *The Psychology of Religious Belief*; Pratt, *What Pragmatism Means*; Pratt, *The Religious Consciousness*; and Pratt, *Matter and Spirit*. See also Myers, *Self, Religion, and Metaphysics*, which includes a biographical sketch of Pratt and a bibliography of his publications.

can be of value only if based upon the personal experiences of many individuals. If you are in sympathy with such study and are willing to assist in it, will you kindly write out the answers to the following questions and return them with this questionnaire, as soon as you conveniently can, to James B. Pratt, 20 Shepard Street, Cambridge, Mass. Please answer the questions at length and in detail. Do not give philosophical generalizations, but your own personal experience.⁶⁷

There were ten questions: What does religion mean to you personally? What do you mean by God? Why do you believe in God? Or do you not so much *believe* in God as want to *use* him? Is God very real to you, as real as an earthly friend, though different? Do you pray, and if so, why? What do you mean by “spirituality”? Do you believe in personal immortality? Do you accept the Bible as *authority* in religious matters? What do you mean by a “religious experience”?⁶⁸ Several of these questions also had subquestions designed to elicit a more nuanced response.

In response to the question, “Is God very real to you, as real as an earthly friend, though different?” James replied, “Dimly (real); not (as an earthly friend).” When asked, “Do you feel that you have experienced his presence? If so, please describe what you mean by such an experience,” James simply wrote, “Never.” Addressing those respondents who answered this question in the negative, Pratt asked whether they “accept the testimony of others who claim to have felt God’s presence directly?” James answered affirmatively, “Yes! The whole line of testimony on this point is so strong that I am unable to pooh-pooh it away. No doubt there is a germ in me of something similar that makes response.” To Pratt’s open-ended question, “What do you mean by a ‘religious experience?’” he replied, “Any moment of life that brings the reality of spiritual things more ‘home’ to one.”⁶⁹

If we take James’s responses to these questions at face value, we would have to conclude that he does not feel that he has experienced the presence of God, although he says that there is a germ in him of something similar that responds to what others have experienced. Moreover, he is sympathetic toward the testimony of others who say that they have felt God’s presence directly. This sympathy is elaborated in his response to the question, “What do you mean by God?” That question offers several options: “Is he a person? Or is He only a Force? Or is God an attitude of the Universe toward you?” In response to the general question James replied: “A combination

67. James, *Writings, 1902–1910*, 1183.

68. *Ibid.*, 1183–85.

69. I will discuss this response in greater detail in chapter 8.

of Ideality and (final) efficacy.” Then in response to the first option—“Is he a person?”—he wrote: “He must be cognizant and responsive in some way”; and in response to the second option—“Or is He only a Force?”—he answered, “He must do.” His answer to the third option—“Or is God an attitude of the Universe toward you?”—is the one that elaborates on his sympathy with the testimony of others:

Yes but more conscious. “God” to me, is not the only spiritual reality to believe in. Religion means primarily a universe of spiritual realities surrounding the earthly practical ones, not merely relations of “value,” but agencies and their activities. I suppose that the chief premise for my hospitality towards the religious testimony of others is my conviction that “normal” or “sane” consciousness is so small a part of actual experience. What e’er be true, it is not true exclusively, as philistine scientific opinion assumes. The other kinds of consciousness bear witness to a much wider universe of experiences, from which our belief selects and emphasizes such parts as best satisfy our needs.⁷⁰

If he has not “experienced” the presence of God in a direct and immediate way, does this mean that he does not believe in God? The answer is no. In response to Pratt’s question “Why do you believe in God?” for which he offers a list of possible *why*’s, James indicates that his belief is not based on any rational or intellectual argument for the existence of God (“Emphatically, no”) or on personal experience or authority, such as that of the Bible or of some prophetic person. However, he adds to his negative response to the “personal experience” option that he believes “because I need it so that it ‘must’ be true” and to his negative response to the “authority” option he adds that he does make “admiring response” to “the whole tradition of religious people.” Finally, given the option of adding any other reasons he writes, “Only for the social reasons.” This comment suggests that he would be reluctant to take a position over against “the whole tradition of religious people.”

In this response to Pratt’s questionnaire, James comes across as one who takes personal religious experiences seriously despite the fact that he cannot claim to belong to the ranks of those who have experienced the presence of God in some immediate or palpable way. To say that one makes “admiring response” to those who claim personal experiences of God is to present oneself as a sympathetic observer, as one who feels he has an understanding of what they have experienced despite the fact that he doesn’t feel that he has had this experience himself. James also seems to convey that

70. James, *Writings, 1902–1910*, 1183–84.

he has had experiences that are similar to their experiences. In any case, he does not associate himself with the scientific community that studies religion as if it were any other object of study, for religion involves forms of consciousness that are not met with in ordinary human experience.

James's sympathies with those who have had an experience of the sense or presence of God may perhaps be illustrated by an experience of his brother Henry. Unlike their younger brothers Wilky and Bob, William and Henry were not called up for active duty in the Civil War. Yet Henry viewed his experience of being psychologically immobilized as a result of his having fought a fire in his hometown of Newport as an imaginative identification of himself as "a member of the elect company of the experienced."⁷¹ In a similar way William James cannot claim to be numbered among those who have experienced the palpable presence of God and yet there is an imaginative identification with them based on his awareness of "a universe of spiritual relations surrounding the early practical ones" and of the "kinds of consciousness [that] bear witness to a much wider universe of experiences" than that of "'normal' or 'sane' consciousness."⁷² The very fact that James responded to Pratt's questionnaire in such a thoughtful way is itself an indication that he has no desire to "pooh-pooh . . . away" the religious experiences of others. And as we will see in chapter 3, James includes his own experience of religious melancholy in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Thus, if there had been a group portrait of some 150 persons whose testimonials are included in *The Varieties*, he would be somewhere in the picture—not, of course, in the middle of the first row but present nonetheless.⁷³

THE REALITY OF THE UNSEEN

James begins chapter 3—"The Reality of the Unseen"—with the observation that if one were asked "to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."⁷⁴ Noting that this belief and this adjustment "are the religious attitude in the soul," he indicates that he will be calling

71. Eakin, "Henry James and the Autobiographical Act," 125.

72. James, *Writings, 1902–1910*, 1183–84.

73. The approximate figure of 150 is based on my own count. It includes some 90 persons who are named and some 60 persons who are anonymous. Ten of those who are named are women. Approximately 25 of the personal testimonials are from George Starbuck's collection (and many of these are identified by age). James identifies several of the unnamed persons as his personal friends.

74. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 53.

attention “to some of the psychological peculiarities of such an attitude as this, or belief in an object which we cannot see.”⁷⁵

He acknowledges that in a certain sense there isn’t anything unique about this attitude. After all, all of our attitudes, whether moral, practical, emotional, or religious are due to the “objects” of our consciousness, and these objects may or may not be present to our senses, for they may just as well be present only to our thoughts, and their presence in our thoughts may be stronger than their presence to our senses. For example, “the memory of an insult may make us angrier than the insult did when we received it.”⁷⁶

In the case of religion, the concrete objects of most people’s religion—the deities which they worship—are known to them as ideas, not as sensible realities. For example, very few Christian believers have had a sensible vision of their Savior, and the whole force of the Christian religion is in general exerted by the instrumentality of pure ideas, of which nothing in one’s past experience directly serves as a model. He notes there have been enough sensible appearances of these religious objects to merit our attention, and that later in the chapter he will provide examples of this phenomenon, but it is striking that ideas have played such a prominent role in religion, that religion “is full of abstract objects,” and that these abstract objects have power equal to the objects that are present to one’s senses. There are, for example, ideas concerning the attributes of God such as holiness, omniscience, mercy, infinity, and tri-unity. Moreover, the mystical authorities in all religions insist that the very absence of definite sensible images is critical for the contemplation of higher divine truths. He cites philosophers Immanuel Kant and Plato and their insistence that abstract ideas have a power that sensible images lack. He also reminds his listeners that in the lecture preceding this one he referred to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s emphasis on “the abstract divineness of things,” and that in churches that view themselves as ethical societies there is “a similar worship of the abstract divine” and of “the moral law believed in as an ultimate object.”⁷⁷

This, however, leads James to focus on the role that the senses may play in making these abstract ideas more real to us. He suggests that the Greek gods were originally only half-metaphoric personifications of these great spheres of abstract law and order, and he compares this process of personification to the ways in which we today “speak of the smile of the morning, the kiss of the breeze, or the bite of the cold, without really meaning that

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 57.

these phenomena of nature actually wear a human face.”⁷⁸ Yet, he feels that there is a sense that is deeper than the particular senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell, as if “there were in 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.”⁷⁹ If there is such a sense, we might assume that the role of the particular senses of sight, hearing, touch, and smell is to awaken our attitudes and conduct by exciting this sense of reality; but anything else, any idea, for example, might also excite it, and insofar “as religious conceptions were able to touch this reality-feeling, they would be believed in despite criticism, even though they might be so vague and remote as to be almost unimaginable.”⁸⁰

James goes on to suggest that the most curious proofs of the existence of such an undifferentiated sense of reality are found in hallucinatory experiences because “it often happens that an hallucination is imperfectly developed: the person affected will feel a ‘presence’ in the room, definitely localized, facing in one particular way, real in the most emphatic sense of the word, often coming suddenly, and as suddenly gone; and yet neither seen, heard, touched, nor cognized in any of the usual ‘sensible’ ways.”⁸¹ To illustrate this hallucinatory sense of a “presence” in the room he cites the case of an “intimate friend of mine, one of the keenest intellects I know,” who “has had several experiences of this sort.”⁸² This is what the friend wrote in response to his inquiries: “I have several times within the past few years felt the so-called ‘consciousness of a presence.’ The experiences which I have in mind are clearly distinguishable from another kind of experience which I have had very frequently, and which I fancy many persons would also call the ‘consciousness of a presence.’ But the difference for me between the two sets of experience is as great as the difference between feeling a slight warmth originating I know not where, and standing in the midst of a conflagration with all the ordinary senses alert.”⁸³

James’s friend went on to describe the first of these experiences:

It was about September, 1884, when I had the first experience.
On the previous night I had had, after getting into bed at my

78. *Ibid.*, 58.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

82. *Ibid.*, 59.

83. *Ibid.*

rooms in College, a vivid tactile hallucination of being grasped by the arm, which made me get up and search the room for an intruder; but the sense of presence so called came on the next night. After I had got into bed and blown out the candle, I lay awake awhile thinking on the previous night's experience, when suddenly I *felt* something come into the room and stay close to my bed. It remained only a minute or two. I did not recognize it by any ordinary sense, and yet there was a horribly unpleasant "sensation" connected with it. It stirred something more at the roots of my being than any ordinary perception. The feeling had something of the quality of a very large tearing vital pain spreading chiefly over the chest, but within the organism—and yet the feeling was not *pain* so much as *abhorrence*. At all events, something was present with me, and I knew its presence far more surely than I have ever known the presence of any fleshly living creature. I was conscious of its departure as of its coming; an almost instantaneously swift going through the door, and the "horrible sensation" disappeared.⁸⁴

Continuing his account of the experience, he described what happened the following night:

On the third night when I retired my mind was absorbed in some lectures which I was preparing, and I was still absorbed in these when I became aware of the actual presence (though not of the *coming*) of the thing that was there the night before, and of the "horrible sensation.." I then mentally concentrated all my effort to charge this "thing," if it was evil, to depart, if it was *not* evil, to tell me who or what it was, and if it could not explain itself, to go, and that I would compel it to go. It went as on the previous night, and my body quickly recovered its normal state.⁸⁵

He added that on two other occasions he has had exactly the same "horrible sensation," and one time it lasted a full quarter of an hour. In all three instances he experienced the certainty that *something* was standing there and that it was indescribably *stronger* than the ordinary certainty of companionship that we experience when we are in the close presence of ordinary living people. He added, "The something seemed close to me, and intensely more real than any ordinary perception. Although I felt it to be like unto myself,

84. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

85. *Ibid.*, 60 (*italics original*).

so to speak, or finite, small, and distressful, as it were, I didn't recognize it as any individual being or person."⁸⁶

James adds that on other occasions the same friend has "had the sense of presence developed with equal intensity and abruptness, only then it was filled with a quality of joy."⁸⁷ On these occasions it was not "a mere consciousness of something there, but fused in the central happiness of it, a startling awareness of some ineffable good."⁸⁸ Nor was it a vague feeling like the emotional effect of a poem or of music. Rather, he had "the sure knowledge of the close presence of a sort of mighty person," and after it left the memory persisted as the perception of reality, not a dream.⁸⁹ James notes that his friend does not interpret these latter experiences theistically, as signifying the presence of God, but "it would clearly not have been unnatural to interpret them as a revelation of the deity's existence."⁹⁰

Acknowledging that the oddity of this account might be disconcerting to his listeners, James goes on to cite a couple of similar narratives to show that such experiences are quite common. These accounts include the sense that a friend is standing nearby, that there is a spiritual presence in the room, and that a man has squeezed himself under the crack of the door and moved across the room. James concludes that these cases "prove the existence in our mental machinery of a sense of present reality more diffused and general than that which our special senses yield."⁹¹ How to explain them in organic terms would, he suggests, present the psychologist with a "pretty problem," although it is natural to relate them to some muscular sense "with the feeling that our muscles were innervating themselves for action."⁹²

But what especially interests him here is the similarity between these accounts and accounts in the pages of religious biography of the believer's direct perception of a living God's existence. He cites in this regard a brief memorandum by James Russell Lowell, who, when he was at a small gathering at a friend's house, happened to say something about "the presence of spirits (of whom, I said, I was often dimly aware)."⁹³ Whereupon "Mr. [James] Putnam entered into an argument with me on spiritual matters,"

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 60–61.

90. Ibid., 61. I have discussed the possibility that the "intimate friend" was James himself in Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, 37–42.

91. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 63.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid., 66.

and “as I was speaking, the whole system rose up before me like a vague destiny looming from the Abyss.”⁹⁴ Lowell continues: “I never before so clearly felt the Spirit of God in me and around me. The whole room seemed to me full of God. The air seemed to waver to and fro with the presence of Something I know not what. I spoke with the calmness and clearness of a prophet.”⁹⁵ He adds that he cannot say “what this revelation was” because he has “not yet studied it enough,” but “I shall perfect it one day, and then you shall hear it and acknowledge its grandeur.”⁹⁶

James cites another example, this one from George Starbuck’s manuscript collection, in which a clergyman felt the presence of God when he was standing on a hilltop. The clergyman writes: “I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with Him. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained.”⁹⁷ Noting the impossibility of describing the experience fully, he compared it to the effect of some great orchestra “when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards, and almost bursting with its own emotion.”⁹⁸ He added that the “perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence,” and that “the darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.”⁹⁹

James cites several more cases in which the writer notes that during these experiences the presence of God was so palpable that God was, if anything, more real than oneself. In some of these cases the person would also hear a passage from Scripture—for example, “My grace is sufficient for thee”—and in one instance a boy who was seventeen years old experienced God sitting beside him at church and singing and reading the Psalms with him. James concludes from these accounts: “Such is the human ontological imagination, and such is the convincingness of what it brings to birth.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid. The statement in footnote 14 of chapter 2 about James’s use of material from the autobiographical writings of other authors also applies to his use of material from Starbuck’s manuscript collection. Thus, this material is not presented here as quotations from *The Varieties* but as quotations from the original unpublished manuscripts. However, the page numbers in the footnotes are the pages on which this material is located in *The Varieties*.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid., 66–67.

Unpicturable beings are realized, and realized with an intensity almost like that of an hallucination. They determine our vital attitude as decisively as the vital attitude of lovers is determined by the habitual sense, by which each is haunted, of the other being in the world."¹⁰⁰

As for the fact that they are so convincing, James suggests that they are proof that the part of the mental life of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial: "If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you *absolutely* knows that the result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it."¹⁰¹ Also, it is typically the case that our intuitions precede their articulation in the form of reason, that the "unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us" while "the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition."¹⁰² If, then, "a person feels the presence of a living God after the fashion shown by my quotations, your critical comments, be they never so superior, will vainly set themselves to change his faith."¹⁰³ It is noteworthy in this connection that James Russell Lowell's experience of the Spirit of God all around him occurred in the midst of an argument he was having with his friend James Putnam on spiritual matters.

James adds that he is not, at least for the moment, suggesting that it is better that the subconscious mind *should* hold primacy in the religious realm. He is only noting that this is in fact the case. He concludes the chapter with a brief discussion of the attitudes that the sense of the reality of religious objects characteristically awaken, and he notes that he has already proposed in the second lecture that they should be *solemn*. But he also notes that the testimonies he has presented suggest that *joy* is often experienced, especially in cases of self-surrender. To be sure, a review of the literature on personal religious experiences would suggest that sadness and gladness have both been emphasized, and James sees no reason to exclude either one, for they, no doubt, are a reflection of the constitution or temperament of the person who has the experience. But most important, the solemnity of the experience gives the sense of joy a depth greater than ordinary animal joys; in fact, it suggests a deeper sense of inner peace.

100. Ibid., 72.

101. Ibid., 73.

102. Ibid., 74.

103. Ibid.

Finally, James reminds his listeners that in his preceding lecture he had quoted the English psychologist Havelock Ellis's opinion "that laughter of any sort may be considered a religious exercise, for it bears witness to the soul's emancipation," and that he had quoted Ellis's opinion "in order to deny its adequacy."¹⁰⁴ Now, however, it is necessary to "settle our scores more carefully with this whole optimistic way of thinking" for it is "far too complex to be decided off-hand."¹⁰⁵ Therefore, religious optimism will be the theme of the next two lectures.

SAMPLE

104. *Ibid.*, 77.

105. *Ibid.* Ellis, *The New Spirit*, 232. Ellis was especially noted for his writings on sexuality. See Ellis, *Erotic Symbolism*; Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*; and Ellis, *Sex in Relation to Society*.