

# Experiments with truth. A sociological variation on William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a classic psycho-philosophical study of the experience of the sacred and of its practical effects on the ordinary life of extraordinary persons. In a pragmatic variation of Kant's proof of god's existence, James uses personal accounts of converts to empirically demonstrate that there's "something" that has causal effects on the well-being of the person. While the article is largely sympathetic to James explorations of the mystical, it offers a sociological variation on the *Varieties* that foregrounds the social, cultural and political aspects of religion.

## KEYWORDS

conversion - humanism, pragmatism, religion, William James

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*Ye shall know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:16)*

William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (hereafter *Varieties*) is a classic psycho-philosophical study of the experience of the sacred and of its practical effects on the ordinary life of extraordinary persons.<sup>1</sup> Composed of twenty lectures, the so-called "Gifford Lectures" which

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he delivered in 1898 in Edinburgh and were published in 1902, it stands in the same league as Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, Max Scheler's *On the Eternal in Man*, Georg Simmel's *Essays on Religion* and Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. While he shares the descriptive phenomenological approach of his contemporaries, his book is not only more openly psychological; it is also less theological and sociological or anthropological than the others. The book consists basically in a fine psychological description of extra-ordinary religious experiences (feeling God's presence, conversion, mystic crisis) of religious geniuses. Based on biographical documents, it follows the trajectory from despair to conversion and from mysticism to saintliness. The focus is mainly on personal experiences; not on the rituals of organized religion. Its philosophical stance is not entirely clear, however. Oftentimes, James seems to waiver, dropping his arguments or postponing philosophical developments for the second volume, which was never published. The short "Postscript" (V, pp. 520–527), for instance, is rather confused and confusing. Afraid as it were of his spiritual "coming out", he prevaricates and seemingly takes back some of the more speculative conclusions he had arrived at in the final chapter.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of its inconsistencies and other shortcomings, the book is more charming, more eccentric and, overall, far more readable and enjoyable than the others I just mentioned. Indeed, *Varieties* is one of those rare books that uplift your mood while you're reading it. From its first publication in 1902 up until today, its reception has been mitigated: critique of its imperfections, for sure, but compared to what academics are capable of, most of it is quite benevolent. Reviewers were startled from the onset. As James commented to a friend in Switzerland, "Reviewers without single exception described the book as 'unsatisfactory'. Having eased their conscience by that term, they proceeded to handle me with sympathy and praise" (*apud* Taves, 2009: 416).

I will follow my predecessors with a constructive critique of William James. James was a professional psychologist and although one should not criticize an author for what he's not, I think it's fair to present a sociological variation on the *Varieties* that contextualizes the experiences and overcomes the inbuilt individualism of his analysis. The paper is divided in three parts. In the first part, I will reconstruct his argument as a developmental moral psychology of spiritual growth; in the second part, I will reconnect his argument to pragmatism and, finally, in the last part, I will attempt to make it more hermeneutic, sociological and political.

## 2 | SELF-HELP

William James is a creative genius. With an exuberant literary style and an exploratory temperament, he has navigated the uncharted waters of the "stream of consciousness" (James, 1981, I, chapter 9) and the polyphonic fractures of the "multiple self" (*id.*, chapter 10). As a popularizer of C.S. Peirce's philosophy, he is not only at the origin of American pragmatism; he is also the founder of scientific psychology, the psychology of religion and educational psychology. His psychology is as philosophical as his philosophy is introspective. His *Principles of Psychology* mark the beginning of academic psychology in the United States. Before the behavioral (counter-) revolution of the 1950's and the consequent take-over of the field, together, the two volumes of the *Principles* (1890) and *Psychology (Briefer Course)* (1892), an abbreviated cut-and-paste version of the *Principles*, were obligatory references for any psychologist. Similarly, *Varieties* (1902) is the foundational text of the psychology of religion, but given psychology's infatuation with "brain spotting" and its aversion to introspection, it is more read nowadays in Divinity

schools than in departments of psychology (Carrette, 2002).<sup>3</sup> With his more popular public addresses to teachers (James, 1958), he has also given strong impulses to educational psychology and psychological pedagogy.

Not steeped in theology, but squarely located in a descriptive psychology and psychopathology of the conscious, subliminal and transpersonal experiences of illustrious founders of sects and religions - "the Bernards, the Loyolas, the Luthers, the Foxes, the Wesleys", all of whom "had their visions, voices, rapt conditions, guiding impressions, and 'openings'" (V, 476), James's proto-phenomenological analysis is based on a survey of human religious propensities in which "geniuses in the religious line" give a first-person account of their encounter with the Divine and extol its practical effects on their life. As a matter of methodological expedience, his "pathological program" stresses the most intense moments of religious fever, when nervous instability and spiritual elevation merge. Considering that organized religion is derivative from religious peak experiences, he avoids ordinary religious believers who have inherited their creed and whose faith is maintained by the force of habit. What interests him is not traditional action, in the sense of Weber, but the affective, value-rational and charismatic action of religious *virtuosi*.

The book is constructed as a montage of some 214 primary documents, which James called *documents humains* (V, 3). Some of these run up to 2 or 3 pages and are culled from questionnaires (administered by his colleague Edwin Starbuck), private letters of James's correspondents from all over the world (in his youth he studied and lived in London, Paris, Berlin and Geneva) and classic testimonies of the "most religious persons in their most religious moments". The cuttings are wide-ranging and are supposed to be representative across cultures and historical periods - they have "neither birthday nor native land" (V, 419) James says - but, in fact, they largely reflect the pattern of evangelical Protestantism and are "deeply protestant in structure, tone, and implicit theology" (Hollinger, 2004: 11).

As Richard Niebuhr (1997) has pointed out, James follows the conventional, prescribed ideal sequence of the conversion narrative of evangelical Protestantism. The book is indeed constructed around a narrative of spiritual growth, incidentally the same one finds in today's self-help manuals, and follows a developmental ontogenetic line, from the depth of despair (the "sick soul" of Lectures VI and VII) and fracture (the "divided self" of Lecture VIII) via unification and conversion (Lectures VIII, IX and X) to the habitus of "saintliness" (Lectures X to XV) and the heights of "mysticism" (Lectures XVI and XVII).

Although not fully acknowledged, the book finds its existential anchorage in James's own tormented biography (Capps, 1997; Taylor, 2002b). The young William had difficulties to find his vocation. He wanted to become a painter, but in 1861, he had a change of mind and decided to major in chemistry, ending up eventually with a degree in medicine, which he never practiced. In 1865-1866, he joined the Agassiz expedition that looked for glacial activity in Brazil and visited Rio de Janeiro, Belém and Manaus, as well as villages along the Amazon. It was not a happy experience, though. In a letter to his father from Rio, he conceded: "My coming was a mistake" (Machado, 2010; 54). In 1869, he had a nervous breakdown and plunged into a near suicidal depression. Disguised as "a French subject" who was "evidently in a bad nervous condition", he relates his panic attacks in the *Varieties*:

*I became a mass of quivering fear. [...] I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and although the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with*

*the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone. [...] The fear was so invasive and powerful that if I had not clung to scripture-texts like 'The eternal God is my refuge,' etc., 'Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden,' etc., 'I am the resurrection and the life,' etc., I think I should have grown really insane (James, 1982: 160–161).<sup>4</sup>*

He eventually recovered, and then replunged into a scary depression in 1876, and then again in 1899. Like everyone who has faced the “black dog” in the eye, the depression left scars on his psyche. He could never revert to a fully enchanted view of the world. His father landed him a teaching job at Harvard, where he lectured on physiological psychology. With the *Principles*, he went on to write a definitive textbook in psychology. At last, he had found his vocation.

In the *Varieties*, he came to terms with the spiritual legacy of his father, William James Sr., an adept of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist and interpreter of theological revelations, and of his godfather, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a prominent figure within the American transcendentalist movement (Taylor, 2002b). He could not follow the creed of his genitors, though, but as we will see later, he had to apply Peirce's Pragmatic Maxim to find his own conception of religion.

With its insistence on spiritual misery, religious conversion and mental recovery, there are still some echoes of his bout with depression and his life-long affliction of neurasthenia (Capps, 1997).<sup>5</sup> In his lectures on the “healthy mind” and the “sick soul”, in which he dissects and contrasts the temperament and the worldview of natural optimists (like Rousseau and Spinoza) and born depressives (like Schopenhauer and Max Weber), he works out the famous distinction between those who are “once born” and those who are “twice born”. Like contemporary acolytes of New Age Spirituality, the once-born spontaneously believes the world is good and bathes in an atmosphere of acosmic benevolence. Wherever she looks, she sees the finger of God and intimates cosmic “correspondences”. Every element in the universe is reflected in the life of the soul. The micro and the meta, the intra and the supra, spontaneously fuse into non-dual unity. In contrast, the twice-born are morbid souls who have overcome their depression and melancholy metaphysics in a more complex, well-tempered worldview that lucidly acknowledges the universe is entropic and running towards death, yet decide to look in spite of all for the brighter side of life in a desperate attempt to realize *eudaemonia*.

Searching to order their priorities, their values and their ends into a metastable system, they develop a *modus vivendi* that allows them not only to maintain a relatively stable equilibrium that resolves the existential crisis, but also to engage in the world with constructive activities.<sup>6</sup> In a couple of truly remarkable pages on Leo Tolstoy's *My Confessions*, which may well have influenced some of the darker pages of Weber's (1968) *Science as a Vocation*, James describes with accuracy the resignation to happiness of those who have waged the struggle for life and have been tempted by the demon of self-annihilation:

*“When disillusionment has gone as far as this, there is seldom a restitutio ad integrum. One has tasted of the fruit of the tree, and the happiness of Eden never comes again. [...] 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” (V, 156–157).*

According to James, and we may suppose that he speaks out of his own experience as a “twice-born sick soul”, religion finds its source in utter agony and despair – “desperation

absolute and complete, the whole universe coagulating about the sufferer into a material of overwhelming horror, surrounding him without opening or end" (V, 163). At the bottom of insufferable dejection, from the void, God emerges as the one and only savior: "Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! Help!" (V, 162). Accounts of conversion confirm again and again that God lends a helping hand when the agony reaches its zenith. When the sufferer can't hold it anymore, he or she surrenders. At the threshold of agony, there's ecstasy, and crisis suddenly turns into epiphany- as can be gathered from the following testimonies:

*"Oh, help me, help me! cried I, thou Redeemer of souls, and save me, or I am gone forever. [...] At that instant of time when I gave all up to him to do with me as he pleased, and was willing that God should rule over me at his pleasure, redeeming love broke into my soul with repeated scriptures, with such power that my whole soul seemed to be melted down with love; the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone, darkness was expelled, my heart humbled and filled with gratitude, and my whole soul, that was a few minutes ago groaning under mountains of death, and crying to an unknown God for help, was now filled with immortal love..." (V, 218).*

*"How long, O Lord, how long?" After repeating this and similar language several times, I seemed to sink away into a state of insensibility. When I came to myself again I was on my knees, praying not for myself but for others. I felt submission to the will of God, willing that he should do with me as should seem good in his sight. My concern seemed all lost in concern for others" (V, 215).*

*"I simply said: 'Lord, I have done all I can; I leave the whole matter with Thee;' and immediately there came to me a great peace" (V, 208).*

The transition from a feeling of damnation to one of salvation and rebirth can be sudden (*krisis*) or protracted (*lysis*). In all cases, there is an energetic incursion from "something" outside of the subject, a descending of a higher force, into the field of primary consciousness of the subject. Drawing on the experimental psychology of the occult of Myers (on automatic writing), Janet (on somnambulism) and Binet (on spiritism), which he considers at the "most important step forward that has occurred in psychology" (V, 233), James espouses a theory of the "subconscious", "extramarginal" and "subliminal" regions of the field of consciousness (Taves, 2003, 2009) to explain how a preexisting tendency to believe can precipitate into the faith-state.<sup>7</sup> When the mind expands beyond the ordinary and enters into an altered state, as happens in trance, possession, hypnosis, clairvoyance, telepathy or psychography, the subconscious self can access something transcendent, "something" that comes from beyond and manifests itself in the field of consciousness in the form of voices, lights or sights.

*"The theologian's contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated [...]. Whatever it may be on its farther side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life" (V, 512).*

When the Divine thus manifests itself within experience, the higher and the lower, the supra and the infra intermingle and the person becomes the living medium where they intersect.<sup>8</sup> The noematic correlate of the altered state is "another world".<sup>9</sup> The paramount world of ordinary

existence is not the *ultimatum*. It is only one world, one sub-universe among many.<sup>10</sup> This world is overarched and enveloped in a larger invisible world, an unseen spiritual order the faithful live in and live by.

### 3 | “NOT ROOTS, BUT FRUITS”

At this point, it becomes clear that William James psychology of religion shades off into religious psychology. On the hand, he claims that he's only analyzing religious experience with its overbearing “sense of reality” (V, 58) and its steadfast belief in “the reality of the unseen” (V, 53). From a phenomenological perspective, the reality of the experience cannot be doubted. We have as good evidence for the existence of altered states in which the unseen is felt and experienced beyond doubt as an objective presence as we do “for the existence of penguins”, as Richard Rorty (2004: 87) pithily puts it. On the other hand, although he affirms that he can only speak of religious experience “second hand” (V, 378), he makes a wager and affirms the existence of God as an hypothesis. Thus, he confesses his “over-belief”:

*“What the more characteristically divine facts are, apart from the actual inflow of energy in the faith state and the prayer state, I know not. But the over-belief on which I am ready to make my personal venture is that they exist” (V, 519).<sup>11</sup>*

William James is one of the primary figures of American pragmatism. Together with analytical and continental philosophy, it constitutes one of the three living traditions within contemporary academic philosophy. To fully understand James' stand on the ontology of existence, one must refer to the elusive “Metaphysical Club” (Menand, 2002) at Harvard of which, together with Holmes and Peirce, he was a standing member. James is indeed the one who popularized Peirce's writing for the American public and made it visible beyond the Boston area.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever the differences may be between the philosophical perspectives of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and Georg Herbert Mead, to mention only the stellar representatives of the pragmatist movement, they all (i) share the emphasis on the interconnection of knowledge and action, (ii) displace the attention from causes to consequences, and (iii) adhere to a post-Darwinian worldview (cf. Shalin, 1986).

(i) For pragmatists, there is no knowledge as such. Knowledge is always grounded in action and situated in a concrete context of action. The root of knowledge is action. Knowledge is always for the sake of action, for the sake of doing. Analysis of reality is not opposed to action, but is a moment in the configuration of action that intervenes in the world to transform it. Action that is based on knowledge serves to define the contours of the situation, to specify the relations that interconnect the subject and the environment, and to resolve the indeterminacy of the situation of action. Action is primarily conceived of as problem solving, as an active transformation of the world that allows the subject to adapt him or herself to it.

(ii) The pragmatists' insistence that reality cannot be defined as such, independently from practice, leads to a consequent displacement from the causes to the consequences. Peirce's “Pragmatic Maxim”, which he formulated in the context of a theory of meaning and which remained dormant until James took it up, is a central piece of the arsenal: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce, 1992, I, p. 135).<sup>13</sup> To find out what our conception of reality practically means, one needs

to find out what its real implications are for conduct. If a theoretical difference does not have any practical consequences, it makes no difference at all. It is, therefore, literally, useless. More positively formulated, instead of focusing on intangibles and abstractions, one has to methodically trace it back to action and investigate what difference it makes to life.

(iii) Pragmatism is a post-Darwinian philosophy of becoming in which the world is not given once and for all as a “block universe”. The world is neither static nor predetermined. Continuously produced and transformed by active beings (organisms) that creatively adapt to the situation (environment) or adapt the situation to their ends by trying out new ideas, it is a dynamic, historical, emergent world-in-the-making that awaits completion in the future. The relation between subject and object, organism and environment, individual and society is interactive, dialectical and mutually transformative. With its stress on creativity, interactivity and becoming, pragmatism is a philosophy of life that connects practices not to the natural and social order, but to overall change at all levels of existence. In this worldview, even God is not a being, but a becoming that wanes and waxes through history.

It is against this background that we can now properly evaluate James's “spiritual pragmatics”. It is not only in the *Varieties*, but also in his more popular philosophical essays (above all “The Will to Believe” and “The Pragmatic Method”) that his indebtedness to pragmatism shines through.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, although it has not often been noted, even his famous lectures on pragmatism are all about religion. In lecture 2, “What pragmatism means”, he refurbishes Peirce's theory of meaning into a theory of truth and applies the pragmatic maxim to theology. “If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much” (James, 1995: 29). In the concluding lecture, lecture 6 on “pragmatism and religion”, the same point is explicitly repeated: “On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true” (id, 143). Finally, in “The Will to Believe”, he distinguishes, in analogy with the live and the dead wires of electricians, between “live” and “dead” hypotheses. A live hypothesis is one which resonates and scintillates when it is proposed to someone and represents, thus, a real possibility. Reaffirming his conviction that the defense of religion hinges on action, he confirms that “religion is a live hypothesis which may be true” (James, 1912: 27).

In the *Varieties*, William James does not wear his pragmatism on his sleeves, but it infuses and informs nevertheless his whole approach to the God question from beginning till end. At a more speculative level, he affirms the existence of God by reference to its consequences: “God is real since he produces real effects” (V, p. 817).<sup>15</sup> This consequentialist affirmation of the existence of the divine is equivalent to a pragmatic reformulation of Kant's proof of the existence of God. One cannot really prove the existence of God by reason. God is not a metaphysical principle, but a postulate of practical reason. Reason has the right to believe in what it cannot really know and this right is granted to it for moral reasons. God is real and He is so to the extent that He has wholesome effects on practical life. At a more descriptive level, James shifts back from the extramundane to the intramundane, from God to life, from the tree as it were to its practical “fruits” (to invoke the term that he so frequently uses to displace the attention from the otherworldly cause to its intramundane consequences): “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots” (V, 20). Reformulated in accordance with the pragmatic method, which enjoins, as we know, the researcher to focus on the practical consequences of experience for conduct, Matthew's injunction to look for the fruits of faith thus becomes the ultimate criterion of truth. “The truth is what works well” (V, 458). It is not universal, but personal, not abstract but concrete, not eternal but timely.

What interests him is not God, but his works: “Not God, but life” (V, 507). The way the belief in a divine existence affects the personal life of the believers and shows forth in their habitual

conduct is the central concern of a pragmatic theory of religious experience. James calls his approach “radical empiricism”. It is empiricism, not in the narrow positivist sense, but because it fastens on the intramundane experience of the extramundane. This experience is not cognitive, but deeply emotional, diffuse and all-encompassing. Like Dewey’s (1987: 42-63) aesthetic experience, James’s religious experience is a felt, lived and transformative experience. And it is radical too, because it includes everything that is humanly experienceable and does not limit itself to what can be asserted by science.

The personal encounter with God can be transient or lasting. But when it’s deep and something really transacts with the individual, it is a really transformative experience. It changes the person and her personality, her character, her ethos, her habitus, her dispositions, her whole way of being in the world. It changes the person to the core: by touching the Soul, it affects the heart, modifies the stand and mollifies the attitude. James says that a genuine religious experience, like conversion, mysticism and rebirth, alters the “habitual centre of his [or her] personal energy” (V, 196, 289 and 230). What was once marginal in the field of attention - the very presence of God - now commands the centre. This is not without consequences for conduct and for life. Assured that there is a higher force that personally loves her and cares for her, the believer is, overall, more relaxed, serene, and happier. Convinced that ultimately all is well and one, she stops worrying and fretting and lets go of her forethoughts and her “fearthoughts”. When she sheds her anger and her irritations, as well her continuous critique and negativity, she enters into that particular state of peace and blissful equanimity that the Indians call *shanti shanti*.

To underscore the wholesome effects of religious experience on conduct, James gives the testimony of a man who used to be irritated by everything and everyone he encountered on his travels. Since he started to dabble with Zen Buddhism, he takes it all in good stride. I quote him at length, because the passage is so speaking:

*“I have had occasion to travel more than ten thousand miles by rail since that morning. The same Pullman porter, conductor, hotel-waiter, peddler, book-agent, cabman, and others who were formerly a source of annoyance and irritation have been met, but I am not conscious of a single incivility. All at once the whole world has turned good to me. I have become, as it were, sensitive only to the rays of good. I could recount many experiences which prove a brand-new condition of mind, but one will be sufficient. Without the slightest feeling of annoyance or impatience, I have seen a train that I had planned to take with a good deal of interested and pleasurable anticipation move out of the station without me, because my baggage did not arrive. The porter from the hotel came running and panting into the station just as the train pulled out of sight. When he saw me, he looked as if he feared a scolding, and began to tell of being blocked in a crowded street and unable to get out. When he had finished, I said to him: ‘It doesn’t matter at all, you couldn’t help it, so we will try again to-morrow. Here is your fee, I am sorry you had all this trouble in earning it.’ The look of surprise that came over his face was so filled with pleasure that I was repaid on the spot for the delay in my departure. Next day he would not accept a cent for the service, and he and I are friends for life” (V, 182).*

In his lectures on Saintliness (XI-XIII), James describes the practical fruits of religious life.<sup>16</sup> What characterizes the life of Saints (sages, *richis*, *sanyasi*, fakirs, etc.<sup>17</sup>) is that the spiritual emotions (ontological wonder, moral enthusiasm, religious rapture, agape, etc.) have found



their sedimentation in a stable, coherent habitus that is well recognizable and describable (V, 272–273).

The “oceanic feeling” (Rolland/Freud) continuously engulfs the saint. He feels that he's partaking of a wider life and is in contact with a higher power that inspires him to devote his life to the pursuit and realization of higher ideals, norms and values, which may also be civic. The access to the Divine goes together with a willing self-surrender to its plans. The Divine controls and directs his life and conduct. As the confines of the usual self melt down, the distinction between the inner and the outer start to blur and the self-centered I-identification with the Ego evaporates. Like the renouncer, the saint feels free even if and as he submits to the control of the Divine.

Basking in loving and harmonious affections, the saint wholeheartedly says “Yes, yes” (V, 273) to life and shuns the negative. He's the real “positivist” as it were (as opposed to the “negativist”). Although largely concerned with the realization of his real, “alethic self” (Bhaskar), the saint is also other-directed. He loves God above all, for sure, but he also practices brotherly and sisterly love. The saint even loves his enemies. In a state of agape, Saint Francis as we know him from the *Fiorituri*, even extended his loving kindness to animals and beyond, to all creatures of God. To those who have dedicated their life to God, the humility as to one's self and the charity towards the others go hand in hand. In the same way as the self-surrender may turn into ascetism, voluntary poverty and self-sacrifice, the opening towards the other may stimulate generosity and the practice of charity. In a rare moment of sociological insight and political solidarity, James connects self-surrender and altruism to the “mystery of democracy” and the quest for justice and equality. “It is not exactly the sentiment of humility. It is humanity, rather refusing to enjoy anything that others do not share” (V, 324). William James will not draw the political implications of religion, though. That will be done by John Dewey.

#### 4 | A SOCIOLOGICAL VARIATION

In the secondary literature on pragmatism, James's ontological nominalism and societal individualism are often opposed to C.S. Peirce's and G. H. Mead's more realist, collectivist and communitarian orientation to knowledge, action and society (Lewis & Smith, 1980). Is it because James is a psychologist that he is an individualist or is it because he is an individualist that he is a psychologist? Whatever interpretative option one takes, James's individualism is beyond doubt.<sup>18</sup> It shines through in his very definition of religion as personal religion, as a personal experience of direct contact and communication with the Divine:

*“Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men (sic) in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (V, 31).*

Focusing on individuals in their loneliness, James has systematically and rather arbitrarily left out the communal and institutional aspects of religion. To make the point, let us compare his definition with that of Emile Durkheim in *Les formes élémentaires de la religion*:

*“A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim, 1990: 65).*

Whereas Durkheim defines religion with reference to shared beliefs (collective representations of the profane and the divine) and common practices (rituals) that bind the faithful together in a single moral community (called a church), James practices a kind of sociological *epoché*. He strips the religious phenomenon of all its social predicates and confines himself resolutely to personal religion as it is lived and experienced in the inner breast of the person. Unlike Durkheim, he does not consider religion as something eminently collective, but as something genuinely personal, individual and internal. The social, external and public aspects are merely derivative and secondary aspects in his opinion. Not being given to dialectics, James does not integrate, but opposes the personal and institutional aspects of religion. It does not seem to cross his mind that the internal might actually be a refracted external or that the private might well be “ecstimate” (intimate externality). Unlike George Herbert Mead (1934), he does not consider that the internal conversation might represent a public sphere *in foro interno*.<sup>19</sup> He is so bent on stripping religion of its communal, or as he says, “tribal” aspects, that he overstates his case. Instead of blending the personal and the communal, the original experience and the transmission of tradition, he systematically privileges the former and relinquishes the latter. If one wants to understand religion, one has to go back to the fount, which is a powerful, original, personal experience, and not tradition, religion as it is handed over by tradition (the living tradition of the dead) or maintained by “dull habit” (the dead tradition of the living).

What matters to James is the personal communion of the individual with the divine. Between the individual and God, there is a direct connection. There is nothing that mediates: No Church, no Spirit, no Scripture, no Saints, no Effigies. The definition is remarkable as much for what it includes as for what it excludes. There is no reference to ecclesiastic organizations, institutions of faith, common practices of prayer or collective veneration of sacred objects. Priests, ceremonies, liturgies, sacraments, rituals, common prayers, songs and dances, shrines, relics, amulets do not seem to be essential to religion. Only what is inside and in direct communication with God is retained. In between the individual and God, there's nothing. Only ecstasy.

For Catholics, like Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2002a: 3–29), for instance, who can hardly think of religion without Church (*extra ecclesiam nihil salus*), all this is difficult to bear. Hindus might accept the insistence on devotion (*bhakti*), while refusing the devaluation of collective rituals. Shia' and Sufi Muslims might want to insist on the importance of shrines and Saints. Sikhs may think that praying together (*sangat*) and eating together (*pangat*) are as essential to religion as personal feelings. Adepts of animistic religions might wonder where the shamans, the dances and the fetishes are. Jews, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Confucianists and adepts of other more organized religions may sense and contest his unconfessed Protestantism.

For someone who comes from a different tradition, the Protestant bias in the *Varieties* is evident. The migration of religious faith and its manifestations in the private sphere are a Protestant phenomenon, privileging the inwardly declaration of faith by the individual conscience in the presence of God without unnecessary intermediaries. James's radical individualism, his insistence on lived experience and feelings, his removal of ecclesiastic mediations are all expressions of the New England wasp tradition he belongs to.

The confrontation with other religious and spiritual traditions is not meant to limit the validity of the *Varieties*, but rather the inverse. If I point to James's Protestant bias, it is to overcome it in a transcultural faith in common humanity that is consonant with post-secular humanism. I do not want to hold against him that his definition of religion and religious experience hardly holds in Varanasi, Qom, Mecca or Jerusalem. My point is rather that all religious experiences, even the most ineffable ones, are always part of a tradition, which they express one way or another. However intense and personal, one's innermost experiences of the Divine are historically formed

and culturally informed. They always bear the mark of their socio-historical and function as indexes of geo-cultural location. Not only ideas, but feelings and experiences too are artifacts that bear the imprint of their culture. This is inevitable. Evangelic Protestants in Brazil do not experience Samadhi. Unlike the priests of Umbanda, Hindus who enter into trance do not give consultations to the faithful. Nor do Buddhists practice psychography, whereas adepts of Kardec's spiritism (*espiritismo*) typically do.

Between culture and experiences, worldviews and practices, *cosmos* and *ethos*, there is a strong dialectical imbrication. What defines religion is precisely the intense symbolic fusing of the cognitive and the affective, the moral and the aesthetic, the cultural and the personal (Geertz, 1973: 87–141). Between the assumed structure of reality and the personal commitment to the divine, between the outer and the inner world, between the concept and the experience, there is conceived to be “a simple and fundamental congruence such that they complete one another and lend one another meaning” (ibid, 129). The public concepts in which individuals understand their private experiences are constitutive of the experience. Of course, the individuals are mostly unaware of the symbolic mediations of their experience. They think they are directly in touch with reality itself. They feel the presence of the divine almost sensually in their flesh, in their heart and soul. However, the analyst of religious experiences should know better. S/he should know that there are no brute, direct, unmediated experiences of the divine. Experience is always a mixture of sorts, an amalgam of thoughts and feelings, words and things, symbolic forms and sense data.

The data of various traditions may seem similar, but informed and transformed as they are by the symbolical function, they represent different concretions of the cultural into various material sedimentations.<sup>20</sup> James insistence on the internal is not eternal. In his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Ernst Cassirer (1964, II: 281-311) shows that the religious worldview is a consequent elaboration of the mythical worldview. Building upon the mythical apperception of the real, the transition from *mythos* to *ethos* effectively transforms and transfigures the concrete experience of the real. The split and fusion of the inner and outer is typical of the religious form. There is no way back to an unmediated reality. It simply does not exist, and even if it were to exist, we would not be able to access it directly. Instead of going back to the mythical and mystical paradises of immediate experience, we need to move forward to the disclosure of the cultural form that interconnects and unites minds and hearts into a common consciousness. The trajectory of the Spirit that goes from *mythos* to *ethos* and *logos* points beyond religion to common humanity (Vandenberghe, 2001).

James evacuates, as we've seen, all the Durkheimian elements from his definition of religion. Not only the institutional and ritual aspects, but also the cultural and symbolic ones. In Durkheim's definition beliefs play a central role. James for his part focuses on pure experiences and immaculate feelings – as if the beliefs did not form and inform the experiences of the divine. He never considers that beliefs may be formative and constitutive of, rather than derivative from, the experience. He eschews theology and other exegetic elaborations that are more intellectual and cognitive. Instead of beliefs and other articulations, he foregrounds pure experience. However, like moods and motivations, experiences too are symbolically formed and informed by culture and history. Even if they allegedly believe in the same God, the Protestant experience of Jesus is not the same as a Catholic one. To the extent that personal experience is grounded in a particular conception of the nature of God and Man, the optimism of the Catholic will be catholic and the pessimism of the Protestant protestant. Even if both were to be optimist and experience elation and joy, what they feel in common would be different again from, say, the bliss (*ananda*) of the Hindu. This is not just an empirical fact. It is the result of a simple

application of the hermeneutic method that systematically interrelates parts into wholes, wholes into universes and universes into a pluriverse. Culture structures the experience and thereby help the individuals to make sense of the mumble jumble of reality.

The *documents humains* that James employs in the *Varieties* do not sustain his thesis of private religion. Virtually every account of religious experience he includes in the book gives “documentary evidence” of the institutional and communal dimensions, as well as of the theological and cultural aspects of religion.<sup>21</sup> When the religious virtuosi testify of their experience, they almost invariably invoke a language that belongs to a given tradition. They talk about their encounter with the Lord, they experience the power of the Holy Spirit, go to the church, see angels and quite often they also quote directly from the Bible. They do not pray to Lord Jaganath and they do not read the Gita. They do not meditate; they pray. They fall on their knees and do not crisscross their legs.

A close reading of the testimonies of conversion one finds in the *Varieties* would confirm that the uncommon experiences are interpreted by the converted themselves in terms of a religious tradition they belong to. To make sense of what happened to them and what they went through (a sudden revelation, intense joy and prostration), they use language of the religion they converted into. Let us take the example of Stephen Bradley, an unlettered man James quotes at length in the *Varieties* (V, 189–193). For a second, he sees Jesus in person. He feels palpitations. He notices that his heart rate suddenly increases. To make sense of what happens, he attributes it to the Holy Spirit and quotes the eighth chapter of Romans. “What began as a mysterious emotional experience ends with attributional certainty” (Proudfoot & Shaver, 1975: 323). Converts and other mystics compare themselves to Saint Paul, refer to the Day of Pentecost, suddenly find themselves in the presence of the Virgin or see the open arms of Jesus. James may believe that he can interpret religion in strictly personal terms without reference to institutions and theological language; the faithful do not think so. For them, sacred writings are crucial. They structure not just their religious practices, but their whole life.

The individualism of the *Varieties* is, paradoxically, also what makes it contemporary. If the book has aged so well and is still relevant today, it is perhaps because the world has become more Jamesian. As Charles Taylor (Taylor, 2002a, p. 111) exclaims: “It might seem that our post-Durkheimian world is a paradigmatically Jamesian one”. The emphasis on inwardness, authenticity and expressivism that James extols is consonant with the development of modern identities over the last centuries in the West (Taylor, 1989, 1992) - and even more so with the accelerated drift towards secularism and even post-secularism of the last decades. The retreat from organized religions, the massive “unchurching” of youth, the rise of New Age spirituality and the individualisation of faith explain the contemporary relevance of James. Not only in the West, but as the rise of Sufism and Buddhism indicate, also in the East, religion has increasingly become a personal and private affair. The scientific refutation of the secularization thesis and the acknowledgment that Europe’s trajectory is exceptional and not the rule, should not hide that even in a disenchanted world individuals are “spontaneously spiritualist” (Gauchet, 2004: 16). God may no longer be calling, but that does not mean that individuals are not desperately looking for Him in their quest for meaning and identity. Religion may no longer be the default option. There are secular alternatives. But in the supermarket of cosmopolitan lifestyles, it is still an option nevertheless.

If the contemporary, post-modern conjunction of epochal disenchantment and personal quest for meaning makes *Varieties* contemporaneous, the resurgence of religion in the public sphere, the increase of communalist violence and the rise of fundamentalism make it also remote and strange. God seems indeed to have come back with a vengeance. Clifford Geertz

(2000: 168) is right when he states in his comment on William James that “the ground has shifted under our feet; we have other extremes to examine, other fates to forestall”. These days “religious struggle” mostly refers to quite outdoor occurrence, *plein air* proceedings in the public square” (idem, 169). The Arab Spring, the Third Intifada, Al Qaeda, Daesh or ISIL, Boko Haram, *shar'ia*, the war against Christmas, *laïcité*, *l'affaire des foulards*, *Hindutva*, lynching of meat-eaters and killing of rationalists in India, attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, Pope Francis, minority problems, Islamophobia, immigration policies, refugees... all those headlines show that religion is no longer confined to the private sphere. It has become political again. It is not quite clear to what extent the transition to post-secularism and the idea of the individualization of religion are compatible. Nor is it easy to decide if religion can still be a structuring force that permeates all spheres of society in a secular age or if the resurgence of political theologies is itself a contradictory expression of collectivist nostalgia in individualist societies that strangely fuses the postmodern and the postcolonial in a post-traditional return to tradition.

Against James, I will now conclude this article with a reference to Dewey's *Common Faith* (Dewey, 1986) and try to push James's personal religion in a more communitarian direction. James espouses radical individualism and evacuates the communitarian dimension of religion. Like so many adepts of contemporary spirituality, he focuses on the soul and avoids politics. For him, religion is not so much about brotherly and sisterly love or the realization of the *civitas Dei* in an intramundane community of faith. Unlike John Dewey, his faith is not interpersonal and common. Unlike Habermas, it is not public and communicative either, but personal and private. It connects the individual to God, not the individuals among themselves. Rather than a belief that “another world is possible”, it is a wager on another life. It is closer to Rimbaud's appeal to “change life” than to Marx's call to “change society”, whereas ideally, of course, the two together ensue in morphogenetic change.

Whereas Dewey finds in religion a common motivational reserve of human ideals and ideal values that spur a “more intense realization of values that inhere in the actual connections of human beings with one another” (Dewey, 1986: 53), James foregrounds the solitude of the seeker of personal salvation. He is not aware that religion, like knowledge in general, is not an accomplishment of a lonely mind. It is a “product of the cooperative and communicative operations of human beings living together” (id., 57). Similarly, whereas Dewey divests religion from its connection with the supernatural and explicitly pushes religion in the direction of progressive post-secular humanism as the “common faith of mankind” (idem, 58), James stays at the second level of Dewey's three stages of spiritual development (supernaturalism, religion, humanism). He does retain an extrahuman notion of the supernatural and does not make the full transition from theology to anthropology, from the non-human to the interhuman, from divine love to universal social solidarity. It is only if religion is transcended in the romance of humanity that pragmatism can realize its full potential. Religion is humanity's reservoir of ideals and values. As a projection of ideals and values into an “imagined community” that represents its potential, religion is a totalizing outlook that fuses intelligence (imagination) and emotion (compassion) into common action. The symbolic representation of the unity of the community to its members has the capacity to move them to actualize and realize their ideals and values of “justice, equality and freedom”. Religion does no longer need the reference to the supernatural. It can also emancipate itself from its religious elements and become a common faith in humanity and its potentials. When religion is thus humanized and socialized, it turns into active, progressive, enlightened, post-secular humanism. “Faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant” (Dewey, 1986: 58).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> As befits a classic, the secondary literature is vast. There are at least three edited books with comments on the *Varieties*. Cf. Capps & Jacobs, 1995; Carrette, 2004 and Proudfoot, 2004. Frank Pajares' web page is an excellent internet resource for starters. <http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/james.html>
- <sup>2</sup> Actually, the same happens in *The Will to Believe*, but, this time, in the Preface (James, 1912: vii-xiii). For a sympathetic account of James's "productive paradoxes", see Allport, 1943.
- <sup>3</sup> The Jamesian tradition of the psychology of religions has been discontinued within academia. Outside of the university or on its fringes, "transpersonal psychology" and "integral psychology" have blossomed as an esoteric offshoot. The work of Ken Wilber (1993) is exemplary in this regard.
- <sup>4</sup> In the meditative essay "Is Life Worth Living?", James (1912: 32-62) takes up the question of suicide and the meaning of life. He insists on the necessity to believe that life is worth living and introduces religion as a kind of life insurance
- <sup>5</sup> Depression used to be called melancholia, a word that appeared in English as early as 1303. Neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion, is more recent. It was a common label for a depressive syndrome among the leisure class of the *Belle époque* with the following symptoms: insomnia, chronic fatigue, migraine, anxiety, irritability (Ehrenberg, 1998: 38-49). It is no longer an official diagnostic category in Western medicine and does not figure in the DSM. James called it "Americanitis", but it corresponds to what the French commonly call "dépression nerveuse" (nervous depression), the Dutch "overspanning" ("overstretching") and the Brazilians "doença dos nervos" ("nervous disorder").
- <sup>6</sup> On the unstable equilibrium and the *modus vivendi* of metareflexive individuals, see Archer, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> James' 1896 lectures on exceptional mental states have recently been republished by Eugene Taylor. For an exploration of normal, paranormal and supranormal psychic phenomena in James, see Madelrieux, 2008, pp. 369-414.
- <sup>8</sup> This understanding of religion as an encounter of energetic forces and symbolic forms is not unique to James. One finds it as well in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* (Durkheim, 1989), Simmel's *Essays on Religion* (Simmel, 1989), Otto's *Das Heilige* (Otto, 2004) and Freud's article on "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices" (Freud, 1959). Freud tends to systematically reduce the higher forms to the lower impulses and consider religion as an epiphenomenon of sexual repression. In his critique of "medical materialism", James exclaims: "One might as well interpret religion as a perversion of the respiratory function. The Bible is full of the language of respiratory oppression" (V, 11, note).
- <sup>9</sup> For a strong phenomenological reading of James's multiple universes, see Schutz, 1962: 207-259.
- <sup>10</sup> The fullest elaboration of the philosophy of multiple worlds is to be found in the conclusions of *A Pluralistic Universe* (James, 1977).
- <sup>11</sup> In a private letter to James Henri Leuba, two years after the publication of the *Varieties*, he confided: "My personal position is simple. I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know the addition of such a sense would help me immensely. [...] Now, although I am so devoid of *Gottesbewusstsein* in the directer and stronger sense, yet there is something in me which makes response when I hear utterances made from that lead by others. I recognize the deeper voice. Something tells me: - "tither lies truth" [...] Call this, if you like, my mystical *germ*" (V, xxiv).
- <sup>12</sup> To distance himself from the nominalism of James and his radical empiricism, Peirce would later coin the term "pragmatism", saying that it was "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers". James for his part would at times speak of "practicalism", while Dewey would refer to his own approach as "instrumentalism".
- <sup>13</sup> The pragmatic revival in contemporary sociology is in no small measure indebted to the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). It may be of historical interest to note that Peirce first formulated his pragmatic maxim in French: "Considérer quels sont les effets pratiques que nous pensons pouvoir être produits par l'objet de notre conception. La conception de tous ces effets est la conception complète de l'objet" (Peirce, 1992, I, p. 135, note). James discusses Peirce's maxim in V. 430 ff., esp. 444-447; James, 1995, 17 ff, esp. 18-19 and James, 1912, 120 ff., esp. 124-125.
- <sup>14</sup> Apart from *Varieties*, James's discussions of religion are concentrated in *Pragmatism* (Lectures 2 and 6) and *The Will to Believe* (Chapters 1 to 4).
- <sup>15</sup> Like critical realists, James uses the causal and not the perceptual criterion of ontological existence (Bhaskar, 1989, n. 16): "That which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself" (V, 516). From a critical realist standpoint, James's realism appears, however, as a form of actualism. Instead of asserting the reality of causal powers, it focuses on experience *sensu lato* and privileges the experience of reality rather than on the reality that cannot be experienced, but has to be "abducted" (Peirce) or "retroducted" (Bhaskar) from experience.
- <sup>16</sup> James not only describes (Lecture XI), but in the Lectures XII and XIII, he also evaluates and judges the impact of religion on a human's mind and conduct. I will mainly focus on the descriptive part and leave aside his rather judgmental evaluation of the ascetic piety of Catholic Saints as a "hieropathy". As a Protestant who mistrusts Catholic Saints, he finds the excesses of St. John of the Cross, St. Louis, St. Gertrude and St. Teresa not only pathetic and pitiful, but also pathological and even repulsive.
- <sup>17</sup> James pretends to depict a "photograph of universal saintliness which is the same in all religions" (V, 271), but largely limits himself to the Christian tradition. As I am writing this article in India, I have taken the freedom to slightly sanskritise his

account of saintliness. James has read Max Müller's *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* and quotes both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, whom he had met after the Parliament of world's religions in Chicago in 1893. He also invokes Madam Blavatsky and Mrs. Besant, the founders of the Theosophical movement, but apart from this popular, "prophetic orientalism" (Lardinois, 2007:85–212), there are hardly any references to Indian spirituality and philosophy. While most Westerners have only scant knowledge of Indian philosophy, Indian philosophers generally know the Western canon.

- <sup>18</sup> American individualism is proverbial. It is both ontological and methodological. Note, however, that in the American tradition, there are various types of individualism: biblical, republican, expressive and utilitarian (Bellah, Swidler, Madsen, Tipton, & Sullivan, 1985: 142–163). James's individualism is biblical and expressive, not republican and utilitarian. With Dewey, I'm trying to push it in more republican direction.
- <sup>19</sup> I have explored some of these ideas in a pragmatic-hermeneutic reflection on the internal conversations we have with ourselves (Vandenberghe, 2014: 100–154, esp. 125–137).
- <sup>20</sup> The "ontological turn" in recent anthropology does not deny that culture mediates experience. To emphasize the difference that culture makes, it reifies the difference into a corresponding world and substitutes ontology for phenomenology. Hence, the move from multiculturalism to multinaturalism one finds in Descola, Latour and Viveiros de Castro. Cf. Corrêa, 2015.
- <sup>21</sup> In his important text on the interpretation of *Weltanschauung*, Mannheim (1952: 33–83) distinguishes the expressive (subjective), objective (structural) and the documentary (hermeneutic) meaning of cultural artefacts. The documentary meaning refers to the non-conscious, non-intentional significations that connect a particular expression of a subject to the spirit of an epoch (*Zeitgeist*) or the *Weltanschauung* of a collective. Even if it can possibly only be recognized in retrospect, it is the task of the analyst to reconstruct it to adequately interpret the cultural artefact.

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