

at secular universities. Their aim is not to hinder "academic freedom," or any other kind of freedom, but to safeguard their sons against those who would steal from them the "freedom of the sons of God."

—Reginald M. Durbin, O.P.

WILLIAM JAMES AND RELIGION

WILLIAM JAMES literally captivated the American public of his day. A man at his best in the center of a crowd, James delighted his audiences with his sparkling wit and his cunning remarks on all facets of human nature. James was no less enchanting in his written works. He has been called "the philosopher who wrote like a novelist," and "a painter with a pen." James himself confirmed that he was after the popular audience of the day, stating that he wished to present a "tolerably definite philosophic attitude in a very untechnical way."

Born in 1842, James in his youth received an eclectic education in the schools of Europe. This training gave him a thorough facility in languages. His father had once expressed his wish to "go to foreign parts . . . and educate the babies in strange lingoes." And this he certainly did. Between 1855 and 1860, the "babies," William and his brother, had attended school successively in Geneva; Paris; Bologna; Newport, Rhode Island; and back in Geneva again!

William was an avid reader. A restless, curious youth, at one time or other he was a "dabbler" in such things as biology, anatomy, philosophy, chemistry, physics, and painting. This universal scope of interests no doubt is one factor which helped make him a popular, engaging and fascinating teacher, lecturer and author.

Having received his M.D. from Harvard Medical School in 1869, James soon became an instructor in Physiology at Harvard. Then he turned his attention to the ultimate philosophic problems. The decade from 1893-1903 is usually classed as James's "religious period." During this time he wrote *The Will to Believe* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

During the last few years of his life, James lectured extensively. He was at Stanford University in 1906. In the next year he gave his last lec-

ture at Harvard, and then went on to the crowded halls of Columbia and Oxford. He died in August, 1910, at the age of sixty-eight.

In the decade mentioned above, his "religious period," James formulated his most mature thought. The following is a brief analysis of a few of James's ideas on religion.

As in all of James's philosophy, at least two distinct areas of dominant thought are differentiated. There is ever-present in his writings on religion the old pragmatism which is his forte. Concerning his own religious faith, James says that he takes the acceptance of religion as an historic fact, that he justifies belief by subjective need, and that he reserves religious belief for the moments when this need is most supreme. The old pragmatism: take religion when and if you need it.

And we find also the often-recurring harangue against the Absolute. James states that we should be contented to regard our most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification from future experience. He regards fermentation in religions as a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society, and he says that it is only when they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authoritative pretensions that our faiths do harm. We have here, then, a faithful allegiance to the hypothetical, and an unqualified damning of the Absolute, which is for "sick souls." In James's own words: "Damn the Absolute." "Let the Absolute bury its Absolute."

Of course, the dogmatic and the theoretical are condemned everywhere. James gives a strange analysis of the proper method of proceeding for one who might wish to grasp the essence of religion:

When we survey the whole field of religion, we find a great variety in the thoughts that have prevailed there. But the feelings and conduct are almost always the same. Therefore, theories of religion, being variable, are secondary.¹

Thus, if we wish to grasp the essence of religion, we must look to feelings and conduct as being the more constant elements. James goes on to admit that he is neither a theologian nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, and that Psychology is the only branch of learning in which he is particularly versed.

The dogmatic theological considerations of the Catholic Church and the consequent stress of the intellectual side of religion were especially distasteful to James. He states that he himself is bent on rehabilitating the element of feeling in religion, to subordinate its intellectual part. Individu-

ality is found in feeling; the world of generalized objects which the intellect contemplates is without solidity or life.

James, then, is neither for any true dogma, nor for any institutional allegiance. He prefers no particular church or creed, but is merely for the intellectual acceptance of what he regarded the substance of all religions.

James enumerates the common elements of religion to which all creeds bear testimony: first, a person has an inner uneasiness, and a sense that there is something wrong about him as he naturally stands. Then he finds the solution—a sense that he is saved from this wrongness by making connection with higher powers. He may experience a feeling of excitement of the cheerful, expansive order which freshens him, giving a meaning and a kind of enchantment to his life. Or, he may have a “vague enthusiasm, a courage and feeling that wondrous things are in the air.”

These inner, personal experiences, this sense of support from a higher power, give the most important evidence for God. The old Scholastic arguments for the existence of God are nonsense:

That vast literature of proofs of God's existence drawn from the order of nature, which a century ago seemed so overwhelmingly convincing, today does little more than gather dust in libraries, for the simple reason that our generation has ceased to believe in the kind of God it argued for.²

And again in a rather lengthy, but very rewarding text:

If we apply the principle of pragmatism to God's metaphysical attributes, even were we forced by a coercive logic to believe them, we still should have to confess them to be destitute of all intelligible significance. . . . How do such qualities as these make any definite connection with our life? And if they severally call for no adaptations of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man's religion whether they be true or false? . . . I must frankly confess that even though these attributes were faultlessly deduced, I cannot conceive of its being of the smallest consequence to us religiously that any one of them should be true. What is deduction of these metaphysical attributes but a shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary-adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs, something that might be worked out from the mere word 'God' by one of those logical machines of wood and brass which recent ingenuity has contrived as well as by a man of flesh and blood. . . . What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors.³

But if experience is the most important evidence for God, what kind of God does it give us evidence for? Is he infinite? All-powerful? No! James claims that a god who “works,” and makes a difference to our ex-

perience and conduct is *finite*, either in knowledge or in power, possibly in both.

It would seem, moreover, that under certain conditions, we creatures are able to *help* God! "Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?"⁴

What kind of "God" are we left with, then? In answer to this, we are told that along with the "wrong" part there is a better part of man. Man identifies his real being with the germinal higher part of himself. Man becomes conscious that this higher part is continuous with a "more" of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and with which he can keep in working touch.

But what is this "more of the same quality" to which our higher self comes into relation? James tells us that all theologians agree on the following points: the "more" really exists, either as a personal god or gods, or as a stream of ideal tendency embedded in the eternal structure of the world. When we toss our very lives into its hands, something comes about for the better. Theologies disagree, however, as to how we become united to it.

James tells us that there is always more life in us than we are ever fully able to comprehend. He calls this element of life in us the "subliminal consciousness" or "subconscious self." The "more" with which we feel ourselves connected in religious experience is actually the subconscious continuation of our conscious self. Thus, there is substantiated the theologian's contention that the religious man is moved by an *external power*—the subconscious takes on the guise of an external influence; and there is here also a *higher control*—the higher faculties of our own hidden mind are in control.

There is a part of our being which is a mystical, unseen, and supernatural region; our ideal impulses have their beginning here. But this region can't be merely ideal, for we know that it produces real effects in this world. This higher part of the universe James agrees to call God.

Let me present one of James' texts which seems to be especially meaningful:

The only thing that it [religious experience] unequivocally testifies to is that we can experience union with "something" larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace. . . . The practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a

larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals. All the facts require is that the power should be both *other* and *larger* than our conscious selves. *Anything* larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite; It need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self.⁵

James concludes that, as a matter of fact, polytheism has always been and is in our time the real religion of the common people.

It seems evident that Mr. James, having avowed himself "neither a theologian nor a scholar learned in the history of religions," is rather consistently unmindful of the self-imposed limitation which is consequently placed upon his efforts. He treats at length of problems properly theological. But truly, these considerations are *not* the work of a theologian. They are, rather, the remarks of a lecturer still intent on amusing his audience, on causing twitters of glee from understanding followers, and on ridiculing sarcastically those precious elements of other religions about which he is very often so woefully misinformed or so sadly mistaken.

A few selected comments of James on various religious topics will help to underline the main points already made and will give the flavor of his particular method of presentation. James's thorough-going pragmatism is noticeable throughout his statements.

Concerning the advisability of prayers by the sick, James says that in certain environments prayer may contribute to recovery, and should be encouraged as a therapeutic measure.⁶

On religious obedience: "It is difficult even imaginatively to comprehend how men possessed of an inner life of their own could ever have come to think the subjection of their will to that of other finite creatures recommendable. I confess that to myself it seems something of a mystery. Yet it evidently corresponds to a profound interior need of many persons, and we must do our best to understand it."⁷

On St. Theresa:

My only feeling in reading her has been pity that so much vitality of soul should have found such poor employment. . . . Her superficiality, voluble egotism; her sense, not of radical bad being, as the really contrite have it, but of her 'faults' and 'imperfections' in the plural. . . . Her idea of religion seems to have been that of an endless amatory flirtation between devotee and the deity.⁸

James had no idea whatsoever of the true value which trials and suffering have for the Catholic. He states in one place: "This universe will never be completely good as long as one being is unhappy, as long as one

poor cockroach suffers the pangs of unrequited love."⁹ Witty? Yes! But so pitifully sad too.

Even the Holy Bible itself fails to escape a lacing at the hands of James. He claims that the Bible is "so human a book that I don't see how belief in its divine authorship can survive the reading of it."¹⁰

We have seen this man of universal interests; this man who had read everyone; who quotes, among other sources, the Gospels, St. Paul, St. John of the Cross, *The Imitation of Christ*, St. Theresa, Henry Suso, and even the *Life of the First Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of St. Dominic of Nancy*.

And we have seen some of the error involved. One cannot help, when reading William James, but recall that first article of St. Thomas's *Summa*, in which we are told of the need of Divine Revelation:

. . . it was necessary for man's salvation that those things which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.

Even for those things about God which can be searched out by human reason it was necessary that man be instructed by divine revelation. For truth about God, searched out by reason, would be known only by a few, and after a long time, and with the mixture of many errors. But upon the knowledge of this truth depends the whole salvation of man, which is in God. Therefore, so that salvation might come to men both more conveniently and more certainly, it was necessary that they be instructed about divine things through divine revelation.¹¹

—Joseph Payne, O.P.

FOOTNOTES

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Longmans, Green & Co., New York, p. 504.

² Ibid., p. 74.

³ Ibid., p. 445.

⁴ Ibid., p. 519.

⁵ Ibid., p. 525.

⁶ Ibid., p. 463.

⁷ Ibid., p. 311.

⁸ Ibid., p. 347.

⁹ Henry Thomas, Dana Lee Thomas, *Living Biographies of Great Philosophers*. Garden City, New York, p. 302.

¹⁰ Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*. Braziller, pp. 269, 270.

¹¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 1.