PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION
AND ASIAN STUDIES:
THE WILLIAM JAMES LEGACY

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A consideration of the life of William James may help us to see more clearly the pattern and direction of developments emerging in our own cultural form of psychology, and also reveal the import of religious experience both for us and for other cultures different from our own.

For present purposes James's story begins with an idea which he put forth as the primary theme of the Gifford Lectures on The Varieties of Religious Experience in 1901. It was not a new idea to him, for in the halls of this very Divinity School, Ralph Waldo Emerson, nearly seventy years previous to James, stated somewhat the same truth. James's notion was essentially this: that the core of religious life is to be found primarily within the inner recesses of the individual; and that in each one of us the essential link between our normal everyday waking awareness and mystical states of religious awakening lay through a direct encounter with our own subliminal unconscious life. But, James claimed, the truth or veracity of such tremendously powerful inner experiences must be tested in the world at large by their practical results.

When James said that the true essence of religion lay within, he was speaking from the standpoint of a psychologist who takes as his basic data the life of the individual—individual who has many selves—biological, material, social, and spiri-

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tual, Of the spiritual he claimed that this dimension of the personality "could be known only to the individual by himself." This was the definition in his famous *Principles*in 1890. He extended this notion some ten years later in the *Varieties*:

Religion (in the deepest psychological sense of the word) is comprised of the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men (and women) *in their solitude*, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine (1928, p.31).

By saying this, he implied that psychology's contribution to the religious sphere was the study of inner religious phenomena first, and the accretions of inspired religious experience—the rituals, the edifices, the books, and the theological systems—second. For James, these latter were the primary concern of theologians and religious scholars, but not directly the appropriate data of psychology.

The relation of normal consciousness to mystical states, then, was a concern which necessarily followed:

Whatever it may be on the *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 (1928, P: 512).

The subliminal ... is obviously the larger part of each of us, for it is the abode of everything that is latent and the reservoir of everything that passes unrecorded or unobserved. It contains, for example, such things as all our momentary inactive memories, and it harbors the springs of all our obscurely motivated passions, impulses, likes, dislikes, and prejudices, Our intuitions, hypotheses, fancies, superstitions, persuasions, convictions, and in general all our non-rational operations, come from it. It is the source of our dreams, and apparently they may return to it. In it arise whatever mystical experiences we may have, and our automatisms, sensory and motor; our life in hypnotic and hypnoidal conditions; ... our delusions and fixed ideas, hysterical accidents; ... our supra-normal cognitions, if such there be, and if we are telepathic subjects. It is also the fountainhead of much that feeds our religion. In persons deep in the religious life—and this is my conclusion—the door to this region seems unusually wide open; at any rate, experiences making their entrance through that door have had emphatic influence in shaping religious history (1928, p. 481).

There is a continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge, as into a mother-sea or reservoir (1912, p.204).

James felt that the question of the value of deeply impressive
inner experiences, such as those he called mystical, must be left to the manner in which the truths derived from them were tested by their practical effects on our daily life. This was his famous philosophical position called pragmatism. Thus religion, rather than focusing on its roots, is verified by its fruits—the increased meaning and value it brings to our lives in the most practical sense. This was one reason why James placed so much stress on the importance of the will, and the expression of individuality as the mark of a character guided by inner spiritual values. He espoused the need to be more deeply immersed in life, claiming that "it is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we even live at all," and that "knowledge about life is one thing, effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another." These were James's famous conclusions on the nature and expression of religious experience.

We may now rightly raise the question of just how James might have come upon such ideas. Did they come out of his early training and experiences? Or later professional breadth of knowledge? What of the influence of his Calvinistic and Swedenborgian-oriented father and the manner in which he chose to educate his children? Or the vicissitudes and eventual triumph over William's own early identity crisis? Or the fact that William's interests during the course of his career spanned the disciplines of physiology, psychology, philosophy, and religion—all of which brought him into contact with the most eminent persons of his day?

We may indicate at least three major streams of influence which shaped James's thoughts on religious experience. Each has made its own contribution to a more useful perspective of the nature of religious life, and is therefore of value to us today. These are: 1) Academic scholarship in the history of comparative religions; 2) The rise of the metaphysical or mind-cure movement in popular American culture; and 3) Historical interest in the psychology of religion within the broader discipline of academic psychology.

This breadth of scope also led James, and others like him (Brooks, 1889), to an encounter with the religious and psychological thinking of Asia. Significantly, these three streams of influence on James's religious thought were each heir in some fashion to the impact of religious phenomena in Asia.

THE HISTORY OF COMPARATIVE RELIGIONS

It was the famous Orientalist, Charles Rockwell Lanman, who
by 1900 made it possible for James to become acquainted with the latest findings of academic scholarship in the history of religions. (James had read Max Muller's *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* as early as 1862, and had even quoted in Sanskrit a famous passage, entered into his diary in 1870, upon hearing of the death of his beloved cousin, Minnie Temple.) James was backdoor neighbors with Lanman, and thus saw him constantly when he was in Cambridge (along with such other illustrious neighbors as Josiah Royce and the ents of E. E. Cummings, whom James had originally introduced to each other). James was often invited to attend the monthly meetings of the History of Religions Club at Harvard, and it may be there that various textual translations and sources from the European scholarly literature in French, German and English became known to him. While the evidence is scant, principally because such neighbors in constant contact with one another did not exchange correspondence, Lanman himself indicated that he and James were close "neighbors, colleagues, and friends" (Lanman in Lyall, 1899).

Citations from various chapters of the *Varieties*, as well as volumes from the religion and Asian sections of James's personal library, tend to suggest that he was in touch with some important sources. In the *Varieties* James refers to Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic texts, as well as secondary resources from America, Europe, and India. In his library were such volumes as the works of Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Nobel, whom James had met in England), and Swami Abhedananda; Paul Carus's *Buddhism and its Christian Critics*, and his *Gospel of Buddhism*; J. C. Thomas's 1855 translation of the *Bagavadgita* in German; Rananthan's *Spirit of the East as Contrasted with the Spirit of the West*; Warren's *Buddhism in Translations*; Koeppen's *Die Religion des Buddha*; Brown's *The Dervishes*; Sugima's *Hindu Logic as preserved in China and Japan*; and a number of other books on Japanese esoteric religion.

But James's knowledge was unsystematic. In the same way that Santayana claimed that James "made raids" on philosophy, James likewise encountered religious scholarship. Taking only what was pragmatically useful for his psychology, he left the remainder to the scholars.

Since that time, the History of Religion movement within the field of religious studies has become relatively more developed and well known. With the publication of the *Harvard Oriental Series* under the editorship of Lanman after the turn of the century, in addition to the existence of Muller's translations, *The Sacred Books of the East* from England. a wider range of
Asian texts have become available, with these have also come to light some serious questions as to whether it is possible for Western scholars to comprehend what the Asians—or any other religious tradition for that matter—are saying because of the filtering and sometimes distorting influence of the scholars' own personal religious commitment as well as professional viewpoint.

Of particular significance in this regard is the work of those struggling to formulate more precisely the dimensions of their own methodological bias. While many psychologists and theologians in religious studies are just discovering these efforts, James was already acquainted with such developments during their beginning in this country more than seventy years ago.

THE MIND-CURE MOVEMENT

The second stream influencing James's thinking on religious experience came from developments in the metaphysical, or mind-cure movement, which had been heavily influenced by Emerson's transcendentalism. James's father, Henry James Sr. was an intimate friend of Emerson's, and the two families visited frequently at certain periods. James was thus exposed to Emerson directly, but never made the emphatic claim of his influence as such, in all probability for two reasons. One, Emerson was not on a peer level with James. He was rather the influencer of James's peers who were, themselves, identified with the metaphysical movement. Emerson was rather a hero of the age just prior to that of James. Second, Emerson's influence on William appears to have been perceived as similar to the influence of William's father-powerful, pervading, and deep, but never clearly or consciously acknowledged except vaguely on William's part. Rather, this creative tension stood as a continual enigma in James's life. Thus he wrote to his dying father:

All my intellectual life I derive from you, and though we have often seemed at odds in the expression thereof, I'm sure there's a harmony somewhere, and that our strivings will combine (1920, I, p.219).

Emerson, however, was directly influenced in his thinking by textual translations of the Vedas, Upanishads, Gita, Puranas, and Laws of Manu, which he received directly into his library from the then most recent efforts of British scholars associated with the newly formed Asiatic Society of Bengal. From the French translators he received copies of Confucian texts, and he as well as other Transcendentalist writers, notably Thoreau, 

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and Bronson Alcott, had access to both Persian and Sanskrit literary translations in prose and poetry. One of their sources for such material was the library of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Christy, 1932, p. 321). Significantly, it was Emerson who admitted at one point, that of all the world's religious scriptures, he was most familiar with those of Asia, principally those reflecting Hindu Monism—although he never did directly espouse anyone Eastern system.

The Metaphysical movement fell heir, then, to the impact of New England Transcendentalism, and there were two strains of these philosophies that influenced James's religious conceptions: the development of various, specific mind-cure therapies proliferating at the time, many of which James personally involved himself with, and the efforts of the American Society for Psychical Research, which James helped to found in order to test the claims of those same metaphysical therapies.

The mind-cure movement received its early impetus from such figures as Andrew Jackson Davis, Phineas Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy, and Helena Blavatsky. Their basic claim appeared to be that sickness was a form of wrong belief. The reason a person became ill was because the normal healing effects of an integrated life were inoperable in the face of thoughts, words, and deeds the ill person identifies with which fragment the personality. Cure took the form of reinstating healing, integrating kinds of responses through a change in attitude about sickness and its causes. The means of changing from negative to positive attitudes and the kinds of philosophy associated with such improved thinking differed from group to group.

Because of his chronic neurasthenic condition, James was drawn to investigate the claims of healing by various faith cures, attending seances, having readings done, and pursuing various naturopathic cures. In Varieties, he gave a brief review of the mind-cure movement as an example of a healthy-minded attitude in religious life, contending that the movement as a whole was a "true religious power" that had to be reckoned with. Most significantly, these developments were influenced by Vivekananda's visit to the U.S. in 1898 and later the missionary work of Paramahansa Yogananda, and the Vedanta Society.

One important reason that the metaphysical movement has continued to flourish to this day, is that it has been an "underground" source of religious inspiration for many individuals, speaking to the depths of profoundly intense inner experiences in a way that traditional middle-class Christian
Protestantism has quite often increasingly failed to do. Recently escalated cultural change is one of the primary reasons why the metaphysical movement continues to proliferate and to maintain a vitality of divergent expressions today. In fact, it has found new inspiration with the current influx of Asian teachings at the popular level.

The American Society for Psychical Research, on the other hand, claimed William James as its vice-president for eighteen years, except for several years when he became its president. It was F. W. Myers, founder of the British parent association, who most inspired James with his theories of the subliminal. Indeed, the manifestations of human consciousness involving trance and related phenomena held such sway over James's thought that the half-dozen books he most prized in his personal library were all on that very subject. Additionally, one of the more significant lecture series he delivered, although it was never formally written up for publication, was on the nature of trance, demonology, witchcraft, degeneration and genius—all of which he referred to as "exceptional mental states." These were the Lowell Lectures of 1896. Finally, one psychology course James taught for over seven years at Harvard was a graduate seminar in Abnormal Psychology (1892-1899). In it, he attempted to integrate such 'exceptional' phenomena with clinical evidence in psychiatry and medicine being produced by Freud and Breuer, Charcot, Maudsley, Binet, and Janet, and others such as Morton Prince.

With regard to the specific findings of the ASPR, however, which investigated such things as the frequency of hallucinations and the assertion of life after death, James concluded after eighteen years that the ASPR knew factually as much as they did in the beginning of their investigations, and no more. He was nevertheless impressed with a number of their formulations regarding the reality of unconscious influences, particularly as these had been corroborated by experiments in hypnosis and in personal testimonies of miraculous healing through faith and suggestion.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

The final stream that we will consider, for its effect on James's religious thinking, was the rise of interest in the psychology of religion within the larger context of psychology as an academic discipline. Closely associated with James in the early years of this movement were G. Stanley Hall, James Leuba, and Edwin Starbuck. Hall had originally received one of the first American Ph.D's in Psychology at Harvard (1878) under
James, before going on to Germany to study with such great experimentalists as Wundt and Helmholtz. After teaching briefly at Johns Hopkins, Hall became president of Clark University, and there, among a host of other psychological accomplishments, began what came to be known as the "Clark School of Religious Psychology." Starbuck studied under James and then went to California, while Leuba studied under Hall and went to Bryn Mawr College. Starbuck's work focused on an empirical analysis of religious conversion, while Leuba's focused on the nature of the religious experience per se. James wrote the preface to Starbuck's *Psychology of Religion* (1898), and quoted it extensively in the *Varieties*. In addition, most of James's examples of various aspects of religious experience came from an extensive manuscript collection of personal documents which Starbuck had lent him.

It was Leuba, however, who criticized James's Gifford Lectures most sharply on empirical and positivistic grounds, labeling James's work as unscientific (Leuba, 1904).

To this James replied:

> Your criticism seems to amount to a pure *non possumus*."Mystical deliverances must be infallible revelations in every particular, or nothing. Therefore they are *nothing*, for anyone else than their owner." Why may they not be *something*, although not everything? Your only consistent position, it strikes me, would be a dogmatic atheistic naturalism; and, without any mystical germ in us, that, I believe, is where we all should unhesitatingly be today. Once allow the mystical germ to influence our beliefs, and I believe that we are in my position (James, 1934, II, p. 212).

Leuba never replied to the letter.

It was G. Stanley Hall, however, who continued to nourish the psychology of religion movement after James's *Varieties*, although it was Leuba who was its best known exponent into the late 1920's. Their combined efforts made the study of religion scientifically methodological. It was this very attitude which separated James from Hall and Leuba, so much so that Hall is said to have deleted James's name from the record of the history of psychology every time he had a chance, simply by omission rather than by design. Although he made mention of James in his autobiography (1926), he said nothing about the *Varieties*. Eventually this same kind of attitude killed the psychology of religion movement within the entire discipline of psychology.

Beit-Hallahmi (1974) suggests a number of reasons for this in summarizing other psychologists' analyses:
1. Theological interest in the field introduced speculative and apologetic tendencies, which hampered advancement.

2. Psychoanalytic approaches to the study of religion attracted more attention and efforts, since they seemed more promising.

3. The influence of behaviorism led to the neglect of complex human behaviors as the focus of attention in academic psychology.

The movement was thus taken over by pastoral theology, seeking to apply the insights of depth psychology to the religious needs of the community. But since "depth psychology" was the orientation of psychoanalysis, a principal rival of behaviorism, and itself out of favor in academic circles, interest in religion by psychologists all but disappeared for a time.

A significant exception, however, we find in the work of Gordon Allport. While psychology was rapidly becoming narrowed in its scope, Allport attempted to maintain a constant posture of openness and eclecticism. He was profoundly influenced in this regard by James (Allport, 1943, 1964, 1966). At one point Allport said of James:

William James, like any particularist of his day, desired with all his heart to be a strict scientist. But his conflict was acute, for he refused to accept presuppositions that ran counter to the totality of human experience. He knew that in any particular system "the juices of metaphysical assumption leak in at every joint." In various contexts he himself accepted contradictory assumptions, so that he piled paradox upon paradox, but with the saving grace of insight. His Principles, he knew, was "unsystematic and loose!" Yet he preferred looseness to the "terrible flavor of humbug" that marks the work of those who claim perfect consistency, exactitude, and adequacy for their slender formulations. Further he saw that by their own theories of human nature psychologists have the power of elevating or degrading this same nature. Debasing assumptions debase human beings; generous assumptions exalt them. And he adds, "There never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added, provided the mind ascend to a more enveloping point of view" (Allport, 1964, p.36).

In this very courageous effort to keep psychology open, Allport was soon joined by such distinguished dissenters as Maslow, Rogers, May, Frankl, and others (Sutich, 1961). Refraining from directly involving himself with the efforts to found the Humanistic or "Growth" movement in American Psychology, Allport continued with his own work studying prejudice, religious values, and personal maturity; he also wrote the introduction to Akhilananda's Hindu Psychology in 1946, and for
many years he served on the editorial board of *Psychologia*, an international journal of psychology in the Orient, published in Japan. Indeed, throughout the course of his later life he continually addressed himself to theology students and religious groups on the importance of keeping the mystery in one's personal life alive and vital.

The study of religion in academic psychology today, however, conforms more closely to the narrow pattern set by Hall and Leuba. Recent attempts apply scientific and statistical methods to the observable aspect of religious behavior. Studies on the religious behavior of other cultures by these methods neglect any consideration of the history and significance of indigenous religious traditions in favor of collecting numerical data on foreign population samples which serve to support or reject hypotheses couched *almost* exclusively in culture-bound Western linguistic terms.

The current attitude in psychology toward religious phenomena is such that nearly all introductory textbooks omit any reference to the religious aspect of personality. Hardly any consider topics associated with Asia, or the religious heritage of other countries, except perhaps within the context of primitive anthropology. (Three notable exceptions are: Murphy & Murphy, 1968; Fadiman & Frager, 1976; and Taylor, 1978).

A recent study of over five hundred psychology of religion courses taught in American universities (Vande Kemp, 1976), found that most of the courses were taught in religious institutions rather than secular schools; that secular schools stress the scientific study of religion while their religious counterparts stress a phenomenological, person-centered approach; and that over 70% of the total psychology of religion courses surveyed by questionnaires were taught in religion departments and only 11% taught exclusively by psychology (the remainder were cross-referenced between the two departments). Also, the majority of teachers of such classes, while being theologians, use textbooks written mainly by psychologists. Significantly, James's *Varieties* is still the most widely used text.

The most important conclusion of the study, however, finds that academic psychology has nearly forfeited *its* involvement in understanding the nature of religious experience.

Another whole tradition in American Psychology, on the other hand, has developed since World War II among psychologists outside the universities. Focussing on the importance of the whole person, it stresses interpersonal relationships and often inner spiritual experiences or personal disciplines similar to
those expressed by major religious and meditative traditions. This movement associates part of its inspiration with James's *Varieties*, and may be seen as a modern-day version of the psychology of religion movement as James saw it. Almost none of the efforts of professionals involved in these developments in any way make up the core of instruction in psychology at any level as far as the general definition of the discipline is concerned—neither in textbooks, required courses, or licensing exams. In general, this is the state of religion in psychology today.

**THE LEGACY OF WILLIAM JAMES**

To return to our original point just what might be described as the legacy of William James' In a word, it appears to be an approach to life concerned with the attitude of wholeness, of broadness. It suggests, to paraphrase James, casting one's vote for an eclecticism which includes all perspectives in the widest possible sense of our vision. In addition, some very specific suggestions present themselves through which such a legacy can be defined:

1. Rediscovery of the richness of our own indigenous Judeo-Christian heritage by studying Asian, African, and other world religions;
2. Reckoning with metaphysical developments as a "true religious power," and as a genuine American folk tradition of self-healing;
3. Admitting the spiritual dimension of human experience into present models of the person in psychology.

It may be possible to do these things by increasing creative dialogue both within and between the disciplines, especially psychology, religion, and Asian Studies; and, most important, to foster the training of translators from one professional language of specialization to another.

The real import of the legacy, however, lies with each individual—the opportunity each of us has to fulfill as completely as we can our own personal destiny—which may be nothing less than the realization of who we truly, uniquely are. In this regard, James suggested in the *Varieties* the practice of spiritual discipline as a moral equivalent to war—the need for something equally heroic, but much more positive than guns or dead bodies.

In the American Indian peace-shield tradition, it is said that each of us is born with a unique beginning medicine for healing which we must discover how to use before we can learn of the healing medicine of others. And further, it is only by
developing our own medicine that we as individuals can ever make a contribution to the turning of the universal medicine wheel—the spiritual healing of all life. Similarly,

Each attitude being a syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.

This was the message of William James—a man who in his time set the mood for an age—an age which, upon closer examination, we now find to be none other than our own.

REFERENCES


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