JUSTIFICATION AND CRITIQUE: THE WILL TO BELIEVE AND THE PUBLIC DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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 "The Will to Believe" remains one of the most intriguing and controversial pragmatic contributions to philosophy of religion. Richard Rorty has offered an interesting analysis of its controversial character and suggests that we should see James as arguing for a privatization of religion: the right to adopt a believing attitude is limited to private projects that in no way affect others. I propose another reading that (1) acknowledges that religious (and other existential) commitments do have public dimensions and (2) uses those dimensions as vehicles for critical reflection. To that end, I make a heuristic distinction between two phases of inquiry that I label *justification* and *critique*, and go on to argue that when understood against the background of a pragmatic philosophical anthropology, a Jamesian approach helps clear the ground for a more comprehensive critical reflection on religion and religious traditions. Whereas Rorty sees any acknowledgement of public dimensions of religious belief as a threat to democracy, I believe that we can rather say that such acknowledgements offer resources for those who seek to develop more democratic forms of religion.

The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and one another.[1]

~ The Varieties of Religious Experience ~

James is often praised for his refusal to forget that philosophy addresses the concerns of human beings of flesh and blood.[2] What some epistemic automata or disinterested spectators would choose to believe or do in our situation is not particularly important, since *our* lives are not like theirs anyway. One of the papers where this humane tendency is perhaps most visible is "The Will to Believe," where James argues, against evidentialist critics such as W. K. Clifford, that in religious matters, we are entitled to let our "passional nature" determine what to believe in cases where the evidence is inconclusive, and there is a choice to be made between live options, a choice that is both forced and momentous (that is, the choice cannot be avoided, and it matters greatly how we choose).[3]

James's suggestion did provoke a number of positive and negative responses. Bertrand Russell complains – with reference to both James and Dewey – that pragmatists seem to lack the necessary humility that philosophers have traditionally inculcated by stressing the independence and importance of truth, something that leads, in turn, to a form of "cosmic impiety" that Russell describes as one of the "greatest dangers of our time."[4] And John Hick, perhaps the most respected and influential Anglo-Saxon philosopher of religion of the 20th century, and certainly no hard-boiled evidentialist, nevertheless objects to pragmatic justifications of religious beliefs because they seem to offer people a full-blown license for wishful thinking.[5] More sympathetic readers have suggested that James's position is actually rather close to Clifford's, and also draw attention to the fact that James himself points out that the choice to let the fear of falsehood override the desire to find truth is itself a choice based on our "passional nature," and hence not the disinterested position it often presents itself as.[6]

Can, then, the objections be writ off as due to careless readings of "The Will to Believe," or is there some genuine worry at stake here? Richard Rorty, who certainly never took charges of 'cosmic impiety,' or failure to respect the inherent worth of 'truth' very seriously, nevertheless acknowledges the worries of James's critics. He writes: "A minimal Clifford-like view can be summed up in the claim that, although your emotions are your own business, your beliefs are everybody's business" – as long, that is, as you uphold the standard pragmatic understanding of 'belief.'[7] Typically, we seem unable to discuss and argue for or against emotional intentional stances such as needs, hopes, and desires, and this is what makes them problematic whenever our choices attain a public dimension. Schematically put: *If* we read James as saying that human needs, hopes, and desires can entitle us to adopt some religious beliefs, *and* we adopt the pragmatic view of beliefs as habits of action and hence also as "premises for practical reasoning," *then* James may seem to offer a license for people to bring their private convictions into all kinds of public setting.[8] *That*, Rorty seems to claim, is a worry that pragmatists should take seriously.

Rorty sees only one way to come to terms with this worry: to reemphasize the individualist tenor of James's approach to religion, and then locate religion firmly in a private sphere via two steps. First, he offers a reinterpretation of religious beliefs as 'fuzzy' intentional stances unable to serve ordinary functions of belief, such as prediction and control, and, hence, inaccessible to familiar types of checks and tests.[9] Second, and more importantly, he draws a sharp distinction between public/collective projects of cooperation and private projects of perfection, and he proposes that we take James as saying that in our *private* lives, we are just as entitled to adopt a religious outlook as we are to accept or reject a job proposal without offering any intersubjectively acceptable reasons. A thus privatized religious commitment would not dictate "anybody's moral choices save one's own." [10] In the public sphere, though, where we engage in cooperative projects and hence need some rough consensus on what to consider good arguments, legitimate grounds, and so on, other obligations apply, and here, no similar entitlement to let my passional nature rule the ground exists.[11]

Rorty's reading of James is part of his larger programme of promoting an anticlericalist public political culture, but here, it is worth noticing that the question of what role that religion should play in public deliberation is actually logically distinct from the question of whether religion has other public dimensions that make possible and create a need for critical reflection.[12] It is the latter sense of 'public dimension' that will concern me here, so I will not engage in a critical evaluation of anticlericalism. Nor will I question Rorty's reading of James, which, after all, does not aim at faithful representation as much as it is an attempt to describe what James *should* have said.[13]

The purpose of this paper is, instead, to explore an alternative Jamesian response to the worry that Rorty, along with prominent critics of pragmatism, expresses, a response that – contrary to Rorty's proposal – acknowledges the public dimensions of belief, including religious belief, and uses those dimensions as vehicles for critical reflection on religion.[14] To that end, I will draw on a pragmatic philosophical anthropology to accomplish two purposes. To (1) suggest one possible, and in my view fruitful, understanding of "the will to believe-doctrine" (as I henceforth call it) as enabling us to obtain new resources for critical reflection. To that end, I make a heuristic distinction between two responses to problematic situations, *justification* and *critique*, that, I believe, can both be seen as parts of *inquiry* understood as the process through which we intelligently seek to restore equilibrium with the environment. Then, (2) to develop a pragmatic understanding of religion in terms of life orientations that grow out of the practical need to handle and make sense of life's contingencies.

Next, these undertakings are combined to suggest that a Jamesian approach makes possible critical reflection on religion that is broadened in two directions, compared both to much contemporary philosophy of religion and Rorty's privatization-approach. First, it stresses the importance of evidence that we gather as *participants* (rather than the evidence we gather as spectators), and once we adopt a participant perspective, needs, hopes, and desires are not as inaccessible to critical reflection as Rorty (and James's critics) take for granted. Second, it is broadened in the sense that the Jamesian approach opens for

more heterogeneous, non-hierarchical, and ultimately more genuinely democratic religious traditions.[15] By encouraging the addressees of "The Will to Believe" to actually engage in and take responsibility for their religious impulses (combine "courage and responsibility"), a Jamesian approach creates space for a larger and diversified critical discussion of religion, a development that serves the important purpose of democratizing the religious sphere of human life. A Jamesian emphasis on individual experience as the *primus motor* of living religion is, then, not at all incompatible with the idea of a lively critical public reflection on religion; to the contrary, that may well be the kind of environment where individual religious impulses have a chance of developing in directions that are maximally fruitful both for the individuals themselves and for the communities to which they belong.

The goal of this paper is not to save James from Rorty, but there seems to be significant problems with Rorty's privatization-proposal, and thus a more fruitful approach forward is, I believe, to explore the way a Jamesian stress on individuals, and their responsibilities, is conducive to – not an obstacle to – a lively critical public reflection on religion. This is primarily because the private/public-distinction seems much more porous than Rorty seems to think. Even to acknowledge that religion affects *my* moral choices is to recognize that what I do and think affect others in a number of ways. Moral choices are, after all, never simply my own business (then, they were hardly *moral* in the first place), and even the views that Rorty consider private can harm or benefit lots of people around me, such as views about child-rearing, gender roles, family relations, and much else, that is often related to our religious identities. Even outside the sphere of public deliberation, there are also lots of associations, NGO's and so on that my personal convictions can lead me to engage in, and that have consequences that extend well beyond the private sphere. Not least feminists have been attentive to the risks of creating (artificial) boundaries between public and private.[16] Another reason for seeking alternatives to the Rortian approach is that currently, we live in an era that sociologists characterize in terms of a global return and deprivatization of religion.[17] To continue to insist that religion should have no public dimensions seems rather fruitless

compared to noting that such dimensions exist and asking what resources for critique they make available.

"THE WILL TO BELIEVE" IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY RELIGION

In order to situate "The Will to Believe," it is helpful to remember that philosophy of religion in its Western version is heavily influenced by the Enlightenment view of religion as a problematic phenomenon. While philosophers of art or science, to take a couple of examples, rarely question the entire subject-matter of their discipline, or ask whether mankind would be better off without poetry or physics, contemporary philosophers of religion are accustomed to taking such questions concerning religion quite seriously.[18] The philosophical default stance towards religion (both among critics and defenders) has thus been a kind of comprehensive sceptical attitude to religion, the kind of stance that Clifford expresses and James responds to. It is in view of that understanding of the 'normal' state of philosophy of religion that James's suggestion comes to look provocative, as a kind of short-circuiting of the publicly important question of the *rational acceptability* of religious belief.

Allow me to elaborate. Hick's negative evaluation of the will to believe-doctrine makes sense, I believe, if we view it against the background of the kind of sceptical stance described above, which naturally stresses a detached perspective that leads to a favouring of the kind of evidence for and against religious belief that we can obtain from the perspective of what I, following John Dewey, would call a *spectator* perspective.[19] The ideal of a spectator perspective is that we should, as far as possible, eliminate the influence of our subjective stances. Needs, hopes, and desires are paradigmatically *subjective* contributions, and, as such, problematic as intersubjectively valid reasons for some belief or standpoint, a point that, Rorty thinks, holds even if we reject extreme subjectivism and traditional metaphysically charged correspondence theories of truth.

This is a view of judgements (and needs, hopes, and desires that help us make them) that pragmatists have often contested. Dewey, for instance, in his critical analysis of meta-ethics,

suggests that although emotivists and value-objectivists certainly disagree about the semantic (and thus often the ontological and epistemological) status of moral judgements, they share a view of moral judgements as something we make as spectators, which leads us to think of them as having an immediate character, and as somehow pressing themselves upon us.[20] If we learned instead, Dewey argues, to see moral judgements as outcomes of processes where we, as *participants*, gradually modify initially unreflective judgements in light of a whole series of considerations of how well they can be adopted as guides for conduct, we may be able to see that these judgements can be treated and tested along the same lines as we treat other judgements in other spheres of human life.

Dewey is concerned, here, with the continuity he traces between different forms of *judgement*, but nothing stands in the way of considering needs, hopes, and desires, too, as open to critique, once we take a participant perspective and see the judgements they, if sincerely adopted, give rise to, as guides for conduct. However, adopting them as guides for conduct suggests that we need to lay the comprehensive sceptical attitude to rest to overcome the paralysis of doubt. I take the Jamesian approach to add, we need to do that in a way that keeps the door open for critical reflection. This is where the heuristic distinction between justification and critique comes into play.

JUSTIFICATION AND CRITIQUE AS PHASES OF INQUIRY

Justification is, I would propose, a response to the kind of comprehensive sceptical attitude towards religion that dominated the intellectual classes of James's (as well as our) time. For those who find religious ways to describe the human existential situation(s) unattractive, religion is little else than a potentially oppressive and dangerous relict from times long gone. Then, there are religious believers who simply cannot conceive of the thought that they might be mistaken. James addresses the people who are attracted to some religious outlook (i.e. an outlook that is *live* for them) but at the same time feel the pull of the Cliffordian proposal that it is always wrong to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence.[21]

Justification is hence a kind of inquiry that is relatively *comprehensive* and relatively *detached*; it seeks a perspective where we step outside some human practice and ask whether we should engage in it or not.[22] This, I take it, is the kind of situation for which the will to believe-doctrine is highly relevant as a way of overcoming the inertia that the experience of being torn between different (religious and evidentialist) impulses may cause.[23]

In contrast, critique, which at least in logical terms comes *after* justification, has a more *engaged* and *piecemeal* character that requires that we have *temporarily* laid the comprehensive sceptical worries to rest, and that we hence engage as *participants* in some process. This is the kind of evidence that, James claims, may only become available once we act on some beliefs – but it is important to add here that the same holds for counter-evidence, that is, evidence that indicates that something is wrong: that, too, may only become available via certain commitments.[24]

Critique is typically called for in concrete situations where something is not working according to expectations. Our present habits of action and judgement prove insufficient, and we become genuinely insecure about what to expect and how to act. What we know for sure is that we need to make adjustments somewhere among the immense number of habits of action and judgement that we currently draw on in our transactions with the environment. The alternative to drop "the whole cartload of beliefs" cannot be taken seriously outside science (and perhaps not even there); hence the piecemeal character of critique.[25] The difference between justification and critique as different forms of inquiry concerns, hence, primarily, the *scope* of each, and the situations where they are called for.

With the distinction between justification and critique now in place, I wish to say something more about the ways in which they are intimately related. James presents us with several examples where belief that precedes the evidence is not only appropriate, but even essential for a good outcome. One example is that of friendship, where a sceptical attitude is likely to ruin any chances of ever making a friend.[26] Another particularly striking example (not from "The Will to Believe," but "The

Sentiment of Rationality"), is that of a mountain-climber who has had "the ill-luck to work [herself] into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap."[27] If the climber doubts that she is capable of making the leap, she will fail to perform her best, and that, in turn, means certain death.

This is typically the kind of situation where justification is called for. But note that there is no reason to think that a choice made in the absence of firm evidential support is the final word on these matters, or the only relevant factor for success. Rather, it is a precondition for making the best possible attempt to handle, *as participants*, some specific human predicament. This point will become particularly important with regard to religion, but I wish to start with a simpler example by returning to the mountain-climber.

Suppose that the climber is stuck on a small shelf, from which her only escape is a "terrible leap" across a chasm, a leap that is humanly possible, but very far from trivial. Now, it is rather easy to agree that here, the climber is rationally entitled to believe that she can make the leap – at least in any humanly interesting understanding of 'rationally entitled'. There are, however, a thousand other ways in which the climber can improve or fail to improve her prospects, depending on whether she thinks through or neglects to reflect on questions such as: from where should I jump? Is it possible to pick up speed by taking a few steps before I jump? Is there something I can grab hold of on the other side? Slippery spots to avoid? Should I drop some of my gear, or will I need it to get down once I am over on the other side? If so, can I throw it over before I jump? The more experienced the climber is, the better will she be able to articulate and reflect on these questions. Affirmations *à la* the will to believe cannot supply us with answers to such questions; nor are they supposed to.

A similar point holds in the friendship example. Of course, I have to be open and forthcoming to make friends, but such openness, too, has its limits, if I encounter 'evidence' that I am being used or cheated. In budding friendships (and romances, too), there are countless other factors that decide whether a friendship will develop or love will grow, and although the risks here are, most of the time, smaller than in the mountain-climber example, it is still essential for our well-being that we are able to

understand and assess those factors. Sometimes, such critique leads us to end a friendship or romantic affair, so, the examples suggest, critique has various repercussions for justification in such a way that a choice made in the justification-phase is never the final word on these matters.

So far, we have, then, convincing examples of cases where the adoption of a believing attitude and hence engagement is a precondition (albeit no guarantee) for a good outcome. Engagement makes available to us evidence that we can only obtain as participants. The worry that Rorty picked up from James's critics does not, though, concern our behaviour as mountain-climbers or 'befrienders.' The mountain-climber has, sure enough, a stock of previous experience to draw upon and the process will culminate in what Karl Popper called a crucial experiment. Assuming that there are spectators and/or that the climber survives, there are things to learn from this "experiment," teachings that are useful in similar future situations. No similar tests or lessons to learn from past events seem to exist in religion.[28] Are there really ways of finding out that we are on the wrong track in these matters?

Certainly, this objection can always be turned around, and we may legitimately ask whether other philosophical approaches fare better in this respect. I am actually not so sure. I have elsewhere discussed William Alston's attempt to show how religious experience, construed as direct experience of God, can supply guidance for how to make responsible choices in religious matters.[29] The problem with his proposal is that since our *criteria for veridicality* of religious experiences are, to a very large extent, determined by orthodox doctrine's view of God (or the supernatural), there is a quite substantial risk that the epistemological role left for religious experience will be to confirm what orthodox doctrine already teaches, and if it does not, then it is dismissed as unveridical, perhaps even diabolical.[30] The parallel between sense perception and religious experience that would ensure us that we could discover the cases where we are on the wrong track in religious matters seems much weaker than Alston assumes.

However, although it is true that we often assess philosophical approaches by comparing their virtues and vices

with those of alternative approaches, I see two reasons for thinking that a Jamesian philosophy of religion cannot rest content with pointing out that there are companions in the guilt. First, it is rarely enough for relatively marginalized positions in some philosophical discipline to point out that it is actually *no worse off* than the dominant approach, because that implies that the mainstream can go on doing business as usual and only needs to tolerate the marginal positions without actually engaging them. Second, given the fact that many people continue to be attracted to various religious outlooks, one pragmatically important task will be to ask whether we, as pragmatic philosophers, can say something enlightening about how it may be possible to both act upon such attraction and, at the same time, develop resources to reflect critically on the choices we have made. Here, I believe that a pragmatic philosophical anthropology can help us develop an account of life orientations and religious belief capable of meeting this demand.

UNDERSTANDING RELIGION: ONE PRAGMATIC PROPOSAL

There is, of course, no consensus on how to do philosophical anthropology from a pragmatist perspective, but here, I will sketch an approach that I consider fruitful – at least for present purposes. Pragmatists see human interaction with the environment as regulated by an immense number of habits of action, thought, and judgement based on past experience. Habit is not only the "great fly-wheel of society," as James put it; it is also the great fly-wheel of each individual as well. Sometimes habit-based actions lead, as we all know, to frustrating results, but our response to that is not to abandon our fundamentally habit-guided ways of acting, but rather to improve them with the help of even more extensive sets of habits that enable us to restore equilibrium with the environment.

Not all problematic situations are of the simple type where adjustments of our habits restore equilibrium with the environment. This is particularly true if we consider *the contingencies of life*. People take all kinds of measures to avoid suffering and death, and yet, we know that ultimately, we will all suffer and die. Life is contingent, and so are the things that people feel make their lives worthwhile: happiness, love, virtue,

friendship, intellectual accomplishments, and so on. Contingency is simply a feature of life that cannot be eliminated, regardless of how well we plan ahead and take measures to realize the goals we set up.

Consequently, tools to resolve practical problems that concretely threaten our own and others' wellbeing are sometimes insufficient, and need to be complemented with tools that give expression to what it is like to live with contingence, tools that help us make some sense of the inevitable experiences of loss, suffering, death, and grief – but also of experiences of happiness, love, and recovery.[31]

I believe that it is here that we can understand the appeal of religion (and secular ideologies). Many people find that religious beliefs, narratives, and pictures enable them to give expression to what it is to be human and live with contingence, while many others find adequate expressions for such experiences elsewhere, and a growing number combine elements from many sources. Following Douglas Davies, we can also say that these ways of giving expression to what it is to live a human life is intimately related to activities that spring from what I would like to call *paradigmatic responses* to situations where life's contingencies manifest themselves.[32] The result is no theoretical construct, but rather a set of habits of action and judgement that together make up what I call our *life orientation*.

A life orientation expresses a more or less unified conception of human flourishing, what life, with its possibilities and limitations, would be like at its best (although we overintellectualize matters if we think that it has to be explicitly formulated to have a guiding function). In a perfect world, actions or judgements would have no point; they would neither improve nor worsen current states of affairs. Our world, however, is far from perfect, and it is the glaring discrepancies between what life is like under present conditions and what we think life could be like at its best which triggers reflection and action that (most of the time) seek to bring us closer to an ideal state.

The degree to which our conceptions of human flourishing are influenced by some religious tradition certainly varies even among religious believers, and it is probably also fair to say that

even among many people who do not consider themselves religious, we find significant influences from religious conceptions of human flourishing – and vice versa for religious believers and non-religious conceptions of human flourishing. Talk of influences should, however, be distinguished from the all too common view of religious traditions as perennial and unchanging "messages" that we passively receive, but understand somewhat differently depending on our hermeneutical horizons. Religious traditions did not develop in a vacuum and have always adjusted to changing circumstances and perceptions among both critics and followers through negotiation processes that lack any single centre of gravity or ultimate arbiter. In such negotiations, claims about a perennial core have a simultaneously rhetorical and regulative function: it is a way to situate oneself firmly within the bounds of the acceptable, but it also makes a demand on participants to show how well their views resonate with outcomes of previous negotiations. Since these are, in turn, multifaceted, such demands set certain limits on the outcomes, but they constitute no absolute obstacle to critique and reconstruction.

Of course, the negotiations going on are rather far from comprising any Habermasian ideal discourse: authorities have a dominant role, and large groups, such as women, are often systematically excluded. Still, at least where religious authorities lack the backup of something like the Spanish Inquisition or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the negotiation processes are too complex to be controlled by any single authority, and this means that there are many different voices and types of negotiations going on both within religious traditions, between religious believers and non-believers, and between religious believers of different persuasions.

THE ROLES OF MORAL CRITIQUE FOR RELIGION
If we — against the background of the above account of religious pictures, narratives, and symbols as in different ways and to different degrees weaved into the fabric of people's life orientations — ask where to seek resources for critique of religion, the pragmatic answer comes rather naturally: in *experience* and *agency*, plus, of course, *communication*. This brings us back to the Jamesian point that we, or some of us, may

need to engage in some religious tradition to determine its' worth, *and* that the relevant material for critical reflection may only become available if we assume the role of *participants* (but we should remember that the notion of life orientations makes possible a more pluralistic view of what it is to be a participant: I need to draw on elements of some tradition to count as a participant, but it is not necessary that that I embrace it lock, stock and barrel). Since we only have one life, and justification requires an initial attraction – that is, that something resonates with our needs and values – it is only natural that people will spend that life engaged with the religious and secular traditions they feel closest to. The Jamesian point is that such engagement is not an obstacle to, but a prerequisite for, critique.

The connection I have made between religion and life orientations furthermore suggests that the most relevant material for critical reflection here are the *moral and existential experiences* that we make throughout life. We draw on religious traditions to make sense of life's contingencies, but to appreciate the role such experiences may play, we need to retain the pragmatic participant perspective and the lesson that although we are no passive recorders in experience, we do not determine – by *fiat*, as it were, or through some decision made in the justification-phase of inquiry – the *contents* of experience. That goes, I take it, for the emotional responses we make as well. Reality offers resistance in various ways (that include existential and moral resistance), and to detect and deal with such resistance, we need both justification and critique. Of course, this is hardly something that we can *prove* to a sceptic, but I can see no stronger proof here than that we know from previous experience – both our own and others' – that this is the way experience works.

Hence, we need to acknowledge that even as our life orientations are heavily influenced by, for instance, religious elements, this in no way rules out that we can come to experience some of the elements of the religious tradition that we draw upon as sanctioning and even encouraging oppression or inequality, exploitation, and other things that we cannot help seeing as obstacles to human flourishing. Such experiences call for critique, and such critique, I would argue, inevitably has a public

dimension, as the tradition that I draw on is never merely *mine*, and the interpretations that others, including outsiders, make set certain limits for which kinds of reinterpretations and renegotiations that are currently available. If we cannot make space for our life orientation within those limits, or manage to expand them in some ways, then we may, in the end, abandon the tradition entirely, as several profiled (formerly) Christian feminists have done, to take just one example.[33]

The Jamesian approach that I have sketched here thus seeks to overcome two positions that actually have a lot in common: the Rortian view that seeks to limit the application of the will to believe-doctrine to a private sphere, and an orthodox religious view that sees religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon that cannot be evaluated by human – sinful and/or incomplete – standards. Both these views make, although for different purposes, much of the *inaccessibility* of religious belief, and hence the impossibility of critique in a religious setting. Note the rather stark contrast between such views and the very matter-of-factly take on moral critique of religion we find in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

> Nothing is more striking than the secular alteration that goes on in the moral and religious tone of men, as their insight into nature and their social arrangements progressively develop. After an interval of a few generations the mental climate proves unfavourable to notions of the deity which at an earlier age were perfectly satisfactory: the older gods have fallen below the common secular level and can no longer be believed in. To-day a deity who should require bleeding sacrifices to placate him would be too sanguinary to be taken seriously. Even if powerful historical credentials were put forward in his favour, we would not look at them.[34]

And James concludes that "[w]hen we cease to admire or approve what the definition of a deity implies, we end by deeming that deity incredible."[35] Note that remarks such as these presuppose one particular kind of religion, namely, that which

involves commitment to a morally outstanding deity (whatever other properties that deity may have). James makes this remark, though, not on the basis of religious doctrine, but rather, as in the above quote, on observations about what we may call the 'grammar' of religious language and the psychological observation that "The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and one another."[36]

RORTIAN OBJECTIONS

Before I close, let us look at some possible objections to the Jamesian stress on critique as playing a central role in religion. From a Rortian, anticlericalist, point of view, you may say that all James has done is to show that critique is *possible* even in religion, but that is no guarantee that critique will *in fact* ever become a natural component of religious traditions. What, you may wonder, about the believers who would brand any forms of critique as a sinful tendency to judge God by human standards? From the side of orthodox religion, a parallel complaint may be that James asks of us to let our fallible moral convictions guide our thinking in religious matters, something that might lead us straight into idolatry. Can the Jamesian approach offer satisfactory responses to these challenges?

I think that the answer here depends, to a significant extent, on what you mean by "satisfactory." I believe that Jamesians should acknowledge, right away, that there are no metaphysical or other underpinnings that *compel* religious believers – or others – to engage in critique. But, I would add, if we adopt such unrealistic standards of when to consider a response satisfactory, there are very few satisfactory responses around. A more realistic goal, in my view, is to seek for responses that those who have already accepted the idea that critique plays an important role in religion would count as compelling reasons for retaining that idea, even in full view of the above objections to it.[37]

If we begin with the Rortian objection, I would argue, *pace* Rorty, that the will to believe-doctrine performs an important function by "lowering the threshold" for what it is to belong to and be part of different religious traditions in such a way that these traditions are opened up for new and often unexpected

critical considerations. As long as religion remains a domain reserved for those who feel no 'pull' from the critical perspectives presented by Clifford, Russell, Rorty and others, it seems likely, to say the least, that the prospects for critique within religious traditions will continue to look gloomy. The will to believe-doctrine broadens the field of participants to include also those who, already from the outset, take critique to be an integral part, indeed a precondition of, any sound religious engagement.

To fully appreciate that point, we need to challenge Rorty's tendency to equate James's stress on the primacy of the individuals' experiences with his own privatization-proposal.[38] What James primarily does here, I would suggest, is to affirm the individual's perspective over against tendencies to reduce individual believers to miniature replicas of the religious tradition they endorse.[39] That important accomplishment need not, though, prevent us from acknowledging that religion has public dimensions that all believers need to take a degree of responsibility for. Given these public dimensions, I would argue whenever the religious tradition we draw on in our life orientation is also drawn on by others in ways that I find detrimental to human flourishing, then this is a problem *even for me*. This is not to say that Muslims or Christians must constantly condemn all the evils committed in the name of these traditions, but it would be strange to hold that those evils have *nothing* to do with me, and to never stop to think what elements of the tradition that help generate these problematic features.

What, then, of the objection coming from the religious side, that emphasis on critique would somehow be idolatrous? Recall that not only critics of religion are concerned about the standing of critique within religious practices. One of the great religious fears is the fear of idolatry, of putting something other than God in God's place. How can a religious believer be confident that she is not worshipping an idol? The pragmatist can point out that it is surely too simple to say that revelation eliminates the risk of idolatry, since we first need to determine what to consider *genuine* revelation, and then, within that revelation, interpret and rank different commands and sayings. At least this holds once the sphere of participants has been widened in the way that the Jamesian approach suggests that it should be widened. The claim

that revelation is self-authenticating hardly bears examination (at least not for claims going beyond what Gary Gutting calls "a bare theism plus ethical platitudes").[40] Once the need for selection and interpretation is acknowledged, it is very hard to see how you could eliminate moral considerations from these processes, considerations that, as James shows, change as our moral outlooks evolve – and such evolution affects reflections on the texts and sources some of us consider sacred. Of course, there is no need to assume that moral considerations are *all* that matters; it suffices to note *that* they matter.[41]

As already noted, these responses comprise no knock-down argument against those who think that their religious commitment rules out openness to critique. They show that this is certainly not the *only* available religious response to critique, and hence, they serve another important purpose: to help keeping open a space where different understandings and interpretations of religious traditions can meet and develop. This is, as I see it, one of the really important points of the Jamesian approach, and it requires that we combine a stress on the importance of the individual perspective with acknowledgement of the public dimensions of belief – even religious belief.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I conclude, *pace* Rorty, that the best way to come to terms with the worry that "The Will to Believe" seems to entitle us to let our needs, hopes, and desires influence the public sphere that we share with others, is to acknowledge and use the public dimensions of religious belief as vehicles for critique — critique that thus takes a paradigmatically moral form. The will to believe-doctrine enables more people to engage as participants in religious traditions, in new and unexpected ways, something that generates new forms of critique and ultimately more democratic understandings of religion.

Here, James's claims that we should both take the individuals' experiences and perspectives seriously and learn to take responsibility for our religious convictions (if we have any), are both indispensable elements of an alternative to the Rortian privatization-proposal. The first moves the philosophical focus away from evidence we typically generate as spectators and

towards the needs, hopes, and desires that typically play a substantial role for *participants* as we encounter and deal with life's contingencies, and the second reminds us that even such personal convictions have public dimensions that make critique both possible and necessary.

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NOTES

1. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 264

2. For instance, Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*; Flanagan, "Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It"; Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*.

3. James, *The Will to Believe*, 1-11. I will speak of "needs, hopes and desires" as intentional stances that typically comprise our passional nature.

4. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 737.

5. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*.

6. Hollinger, "James, Clifford and the Scientific Conscience"; Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 51; James *The Will to Believe*, 28f.

7. Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance", 88.

8. Ibid. 92.

9. Ibid. 84.

10. Ibid. 86.

11. Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism"; "Religion as Conversation-Stopper."

12. Rorty "Contingency, Irony and Solidarity"; *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*.

13. Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance", 91f.

14. To call this route James-inspired or Jamesian is to say that it resonates with certain important themes in James' writings, but that I avoid making claims about whether this route was James' own. For a very good recent account on James' view of ethics and faith, see Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith*.

15. Bush, "Religion Against Domination."

16. For instance, Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity?".

17. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*; Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

18. Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 5.

19. The *locus classicus* here is, of course, Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, but similar critiques of non-pragmatist philosophy occur in several pragmatists' writings, I would claim.

20. Dewey, *The Later Works vol 13*. The difference being, then, that emotivists construe moral judgements as reports about feelings and value objectivists as reports of perceptive states. They share, though, a character of *immediacy*; of presenting themselves to us in this-and-that fashion. The subject remains passive throughout the process.

21. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"; James, *The Will to Believe*, x, 26.

22. I have a very pragmatic understanding of 'practice' here: for me, human practices are distinguishable spheres of activity and thought we have developed for certain purposes, although we may only be capable of formulating what those purposes were in retrospect, once certain practices and ways of understanding human life are in place.

23. It deserves mention, here, that to stand 'outside' is not to take some completely disinterested and neutral perspective: we can only set out from where we stand, and this means that even though it is possible to question more or less anything (should the need arise), such questioning presupposes some stable background which we do *not* doubt – at least not *presently*.

24. James, *The Will to Believe*, 27, cf. 29 footnote 1.

25. Peirce, *Collected Papers Volume V*, § 55.

26. James, *The Will to Believe*, 23.

27. Ibid. 96.

28. John Hick suggests that there *is* a crucial experiment in religion, namely, what happens after we are dead. Such "eschatological verification" is, though, very different from the kind of lessons we can learn from the mountain-climber's leap. See Hick, "Eschatological Verification Reconsidered".

29. Alston*, Perceiving God.*

30. Zackariasson, "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy Argument", "Pragmatism and Moral Critique of Religion".

31. Here, I am inspired by Eberhard Herrmann, *Religion, Reality and a Good Life* and Stuart Rosenbaum, "Must Religion Be a Conversation-Stopper?". Note that to *make sense* of something is different from saying, e.g., that it is unimportant by explaining it away. To take an example: if someone claims that death is insignificant, because life goes on indefinitely somewhere else (in heaven, for instance), this does not make much sense of our concrete experiences of death (or life, for that part). Talk about a need to make sense should thus be distinguished from e.g. a crude need for some guarantee that my life will go on indefinitely. Most religions actually claim that needs of the latter sort are, though understandable, deeply *unreligious*.

32. Davies, *Emotion, Identity, and Religion.*

33. Hampson, *After Christianity*.

34. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 264.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Cf. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 97.

38. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 31; Bush "Religion against Domination."

39. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 334f.
40. Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, 171.
41. Zackariasson, "What Is It to Be Religiously Mistaken?"