

SPILT MYSTICISM: WILLIAM JAMES'S DEMOCRATIZATION OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

James's approach to religious experience has a reputation for appealing only to the spiritual elite. After all, he set aside average churchgoers in favor of those with "direct personal communion with the divine"; not many live up to that lofty standard. But his approach to this "personal religion," in The Varieties of Religious Experience and in less direct ways throughout his work, shows another side to his religion. Within church structures and even without institutions, he maintained, there is spiritual potential in all humanity. While traditional Western religion looks for the deepest meaning in realms transcendent, James suggested the significance of depth psychology within each person, a kind of "independent" realm, the beyond within—he even subtitled The Varieties itself as "A Study in Human Nature." His insights into religion also leached into his other philosophical ideas as he approached even science with humility. He was eager to engage in the scientific method, and deeply respectful of scientific facts, but unwilling to accept the claims of scientific enthusiasts ready to reduce religion to materialist phenomena; yet he welcomed their focus on naturalistic ways to understand religious experiences, since their physical focus presented a first step toward understanding the life of the spirit. The "mystical germ," so dramatic among religious founders, is widely available, deep within every human consciousness. Just as he wrote his psychology for practical use, and his pragmatism as a philosophy of use, so he maintained that spirituality is ready for use.

Our ... respectability keeps us from exercising the mystical portions of our nature freely.

William James¹

The role of William James in leading a psychological turn for the study and practice of modern religion is well known. The democratic qualities of spiritual life that his innovations both reflected and promoted, however, are rarely appreciated.² In his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he distinguishes religion lived at first hand, which would include direct personal encounter with spiritual forces, from religion at second hand, based on traditions derived from those first-hand experiences. By focusing on personal religion, he redrew the religious map as historian James Turner puts it, turning religious attention away from historical traditions, institutional affiliations, and theological positions, and toward an emphasis on personal experience that would become central to the modern field of religious studies and serve as the way many contemporary believers comprehend their religious life. James's own seeming turn away from the religion of the average citizens, who in the American context have generally remained content with traditions, and his role in establishing an academic field of study, have contributed to a reputation for his elitism in religious life. If Rick Santorum, a candidate for the Republican nomination for President in 2012, had paused from campaigning to read James, he might have said of him, as he said of President Barack Obama's hopes to increase college enrollments: "What a snob!"³

Within James's focus on first-hand experiences of religion, he paid attention not only to the religion of the few, but also to the spiritual potential within every person, in the subliminal realm deep within every consciousness. In addition, his whole philosophical stance included a fundamental humility, in the form of skepticism about the human ability to comprehend the world with any completeness, which shaped both his recognition of mystery in religion and of uncertainty in science or any human enterprise. This pointed him to respect for mysticism, which despite its elusiveness, James found personally compelling and central to the character of religion; while it is most clearly evident in the intense religious commitment of institutional founders and trendsetters, it is widely available and deep within every consciousness, even as habits prevent its more frequent manifestation. This article explores three dimensions in James's democratization of religion: his evaluation of who engages in personal religion and the increasing popularity of that approach; his recognition of the limits of human understanding in religion and other fields; and his proposition that the mysteries of religion place every human being on essentially the same plane, with recognition of degrees of mystical potential in every person.

THE RELIGION OF THE FEW OR THE RELIGION OF THE PEW?

William James clearly emphasized the role of personal experience in religion. His “Will to Believe” offers a “defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude,” not for welcoming any belief at all, but for endorsement of beliefs in response to deeply personal choices full of complexity and ambiguity, in situations whose issues cannot be answered readily with empirical or scientific inquiry. The climber searching for confidence, in James’s vivid parable of the leap of faith, relies not on fellow believers in community, but on one’s own inner resources before taking that “leap in the dark.” James is even more explicit in *The Varieties* with his avowed intention to focus on “personal religion,” the experience of individuals in “direct personal communion” with the “spiritual structure of the universe,” including the divine. This personal experience, or religion at “first-hand,” as he proposed, is “more fundamental than ...theology or ecclesiasticism.” These collective and institutional structures always refer back to a founding figure whose personal experiences established the tradition; then “when once established [the churches] live at second-hand.” This would be the focus of his study of religion, “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] ... in their solitude,” and by implication, he suggested that these religious experiences are more authentic than church life. In fact, James even argued that after extraordinary personal experiences generate a following, and as the disciples organize and “become ecclesiastical institutions, ... corporate ambitions” take over; “the spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing.” For James, the religion of the founding few is “the primordial thing,” and other religious forms are at best derivative.⁴

The admiration James clearly felt for religion seemed to center on its individual not its community dimensions. At least in these passages, he bypassed the believer in the pew, the mass of people in congregations. Charles Taylor, in *Varieties of Religion Today*, has recently highlighted these dimensions of James’s work in critiquing him for not attending to the role of churches as the “locus of collective connection.” Taylor then credits (or blames) James for the close attention in our time to “deeply felt personal insight,” which has now become “our most precious spiritual resource.” History, Taylor argues, has caught up with James, the original observer and advocate of an expressive individualism which has become a dominant form of religion by the twenty-first century (and a major factor in other parts of culture). By neglecting

its community dimensions, religion under the star of James has become the affairs of isolated individuals, individuals in limited interaction with the communities of those around them, blithely ignoring traditions, which are after all communities of people across time. Even the increasing popularity of personal religion, and with its growing numbers of supporters beyond elites, actually shows an extension of James's focus on the rarefied few, with his same attention to personal religion now having become the orientations of the self-professed rarefied many. Like "affordable luxuries" in mass consumption of high-priced brand names, James's personal religion at first-hand has become the religion of unaffiliated seekers.⁵

Whether considered with James's formulation about the few charismatic "religious geniuses" or in the popular formats of mass individual seeking, the religion of the Jamesian turn displays a focus on the psychological experience of individual believers. Taylor's critique of James is really a critique of the whole trend in recent religion toward unchurched spirituality. This form of religion has indeed challenged traditions, especially in their respect for the transcendent. These are the aspects of religion, especially in its Western varieties, that emphasize the distance of the divine from worldly realms: an awesome God inspires a following; the believers assemble in community for their devotions and establish traditions for their beliefs. But there is another immanentist side of even traditional religion, about the divine relationship with the world and in interaction with believers.⁶ James was interested in both the transcendent and immanent aspects of religion, and their connection; humanity experiences religion both as distant mystery and as intimate relation. He did not seek to deny either dimension, or to defy tradition or community; instead, he pointed out that all these aspects of religion begin with a primal point of contact in the depths of human psychology available within every human being.

Each experience of religion, for the founding few or the person in pew, with reverence for awesome transcendence or in intimate immanent relations, begins in some human contact with an extraordinary spiritual insight. Within any one person, such an experience of religion happens at a depth of human consciousness beyond normal everyday mental functioning. Following the research of Frederick Myers and Pierre Janet, James called this depth the "subliminal" realm, or the "subconscious." This realm is part of our natural psyche, present in all, but not so awake in most people. When James refers to the beliefs of the average churchgoer as religion at second hand, he is observing that while the residents of the pew are spiritually capable of some degree of religion at first hand themselves, in effect they choose to

outsource their spirituality to the experiences of others, the founders, leaders, and mystics, who can inspire them beyond the constraints of their own normal waking state. And indeed, as the history of religions amply shows, every other-worldly truth travels through some worldly person, or as James puts it, for most believers, “our faith is faith is someone else’s faith.”⁷

When anyone’s subliminal is actually stirred in the experiences of personal religion, this subconscious realm serves as “a doorway” to something more. The “more” connects on its “hither side” with the subliminal, the “subconscious continuation of our conscious life”; and on its farther side it is a mystery whose identity is answered differently by different traditions and by different people, each supplying a distinctive “over-belief” that is “absolutely indispensable” for providing “various directions” in life—for the spiritually adept and for the average religious citizen alike. Each over-belief will appeal to some, if “congruous with our personal susceptibilities,” James observes, but will “appear a sorry under-belief” to others. Yet each belief is a helpful clue in the human cosmological puzzle. “The existence of so many religious types and sects” may be confusing, but as the title of his book had already suggested, James actually welcomed this variety. Because religion deals with a mystery that is ultimately beyond human ken, each human resolution of that farther side of the subliminal serves as a “syllable in human nature’s total message,” and it will take “the whole of us to spell the meaning out.” Moreover, even within the “great variety” of religious thoughts and actions, the truly outstanding “saints are practically indistinguishable” across religious traditions.⁸ There is a cosmopolitan commonality of spiritual enlightenment, which parallels the transnational setting of the philosophes of the secular eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Both forms of enlightenment hold out hope for encouraging democracy by fostering the untrammelled potential in each citizen.

WORKING WITHIN THE GLORIOUS LIMITS OF THE HUMAN FRAME

In these subliminal depths, at the roots of religion, the transcendent and immanent dimensions mingle. Depth consciousness is a kind of “independent” realm, as mysterious as the advocates of transcendence claim and as intimate as those seeking immanence crave; these depths are not in defiance of tradition and community, but serve as their well of life, not always tapped, yet always ready to refresh second-hand behaviors and beliefs.

James’s turn to the psychological realm of religion was not in defiance of churches and theologies; their structures and ideas have proposed ways to deliver humanity from its mortal

frailties, and have done so with their own mix of human achievements and shortcomings. In the face of perennial human uneasiness, religion presents solutions in transcendent and immanent forms: religions make “connexion [sic] with ... higher powers,” and that connection is through a “higher part of [our own] self.” Religion is the energy that emerges when the subliminal becomes “continuous with a more ... in the universe outside” the believer.⁹ James presents the psychological roots of these religious beliefs, and the subliminal serves as the transcendent within, with other-worldly mystery, while deeply embedded within human nature.

Just as James did not segregate religions from human psychology, so he did not regard religion as a distinctively mysterious dimension of the human experience. In his first professional work in psychology, James portrayed experience as “one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” His research in scientific psychology had shown him that when the mind encounters the world, it discerns a vast array of undifferentiated data; out of this “whole experience-chaos,” the mind with its powers of “attention carves out objects, which conception ... names and identifies.” Just as human imagination discerns constellations of patterns from a sea of stars, so “out of time we cut ‘days’ and ‘nights,’ ‘summers’ and ‘winters.’” And the “discernment of man” generates many more subtle “formations” for whole “universes of thought,” for different uses in life, different disciplinary insights, and different cultural purposes. The resulting names and concepts, very useful and indeed the lynchpins of our intellectual life, are “all abstracted and generalized” from the perceptual flux, based on its own tangible leadings; the “primal stuff ... of pure experience” is at once the raw material for conceptions and in itself so generally overlooked because its sheer abundance and mysteries are less commonly appealing than our much-clearer but simpler conceptions about that stuff. By contrast, traditional empiricists portray the world already “disconnected” in its parts, so perception to them merely involves identification of discrete sensible units already present before any role for the mind; the mind’s encounter with these perceptions organize and unify them into ever more complex conceptions. According to this outlook, the mind does the unifying of the simple experiential parts; according to James, however, the mind, with an array of concepts, breaks apart the abundant experiential whole that greets our initial perceptions.¹⁰ Like traditional empiricists, he insisted on reckoning with natural facts; unlike them, he did not think they were readily available with distinct clarity, because of the vastness and complexity of reality.

This work of the human mind creating concepts to organize the world of experience involved mental selection, James argued, with attention paid to parts of experience. The distinctive trait of the human mind, in contrast with non-human “brute intellect,” is the abundance of voluntary choices that guide the selection. People choose to pay attention to parts of experience based on criteria of curiosity, effectiveness, esthetic pleasure, beliefs, and passions. These constitute the interests that focus the attention of the human mind in operation. This process of selection provides the human mind with spontaneous variations, constantly surging and competing for attention, with some concepts more adaptive and fit to endure, for various purposes, in a kind of mental natural selection. These human mental abilities turn “originally chaotic experience ... into ... orderly” sets of ideas. Thus “the intellectual life of man”—theories and beliefs, reasoning and feeling: the whole mental work that selects portions of experience according to significance and interest—transforms the perceptual world, generating the “substitution of a conceptual order” for the “aboriginal sensible muchness” of our initial encounters with the world. This portrait of concepts sorting through the deep enigmas of pure experience would be a starting point for his psychology of religion. Original mystery and its transformation would also be an important ingredient in pragmatism, a philosophy based on the “practical consequences” of ideas, or in other words, their usefulness for selection out of the abundance of experience.¹¹

James set this portrait of the mind selecting from vast tracks of experience into a broad metaphysical framework during the opening paragraphs of his first public declaration of pragmatism. Within the “trackless forest of human experience,” the total “fulness [sic] is elusive,” but “the human intellect” supplies “spots, or blazes” which “give you a direction and ... place[s] to reach”; the “formulas” and “conceptions,” including some quite “technical,” signal that “we can now use the forest”—it is “no longer a place merely to get lost.” Such theories, or “philosopher’s phrases,” however useful, still leave “unexpressed almost everything” in original experience, or in the words of his original metaphor, “they do not give you the integral forest with all its ... wonders.” That mystery, he suggests, may be at least vaguely accessible to poets, as he blurted out, “Happy they without need of blazes!” But he warns most philosophers, including pragmatists (and also scientists and religious believers), to avoid mistaking their own blazes for the whole of the forest; theories after all are not the whole of experience. With this supportive but chastened approach to our conceptual worlds, James maintained that theories

serve as “instruments, not answers to enigmas.”¹² Theories will improve with self-correcting inquiry, but they will always leave some enigmas beyond comprehension, especially in the relation of parts and for understanding of the whole.

Each of the varieties of religious traditions also offers such instruments, serving as clues into enigmas of the world, even though no one of them provides a complete answer, despite the claims of true believers. Even with his openness to religion and his enthusiasm for a will to believe in the face of limited evidence, James was skeptical of the tendency to “follow faith unreasoningly.” For religions of exclusiveness and intolerance, which promote division and violence, he declared that these “faiths should be broken up and ventilated” and the “northwest wind of science should blow their sickliness and barbarism away.” For religion, James endorsed what historian David Hollinger has called “tonic destruction,” with modern secular challenges offering a bracing chance to separate the wheat from the chaff of traditional beliefs.¹³

James maintained a similar posture for science, insisting that its methods offer tools for insights, but that its frequent commitment to materialism has restricted its ability to enrich our world, and even restricted inquiry into some primal mysteries. James began *The Varieties* with a jarring oxymoron, in the words of his first lecture “Religion and Neurology.” He did so to address directly the reductionist challenge to religious belief, the tendency to treat the “exalted soul-flights” of religion as “nothing but’ expressions of our organic dispositions.” He took issue with the confident “medical materialism” of secular and scientific critics of religion: Saint Paul’s “vision on the road to Damascus” as a “discharging lesion of the occipital cortex”; Saint Teresa, “an hysteric”; George Fox’s “pining for spiritual veracity, ... a symptom of disordered colon.” With such views, religion then becomes a matter of “mental over-tensions ... due to the perverted action of various glands.” And some of the scientific scorn is even based upon the enlistment of material insights that “physiology will yet discover”; so ironically, this scientific criticism of religious faith is sometimes itself based on faith in the future discoveries of science.¹⁴

The reductionist discrediting of religious states by their association with medical conditions is an argument from origins, which James identified as a form of dogmatism. While medical materialists use the argument from origin to suggest falsehood, religious dogmatism presents “tests for truth” by identifying origins based upon religious authority or revelation; whether the “criterion of origin” is used in a “destructive or an accreditive way,” it closes off “appealing to

the future.” He called this opening to the new information of future experiences the “empiricist criterion” based on the empiricism of experiential wholes, with some experiences understood with human concepts (selecting from the mysterious whole), some subject to further inquiry, and some remaining enigmas, but all in need of further clarification. In each case, the posture of our questions (which direct attention to parts of the whole) will play a role in the resulting types of answers. The right question is the “right one for your purpose,” following any of the human motivations he identified in his psychology, with the best questions directed to the “essential qualities” needed to address particular issues.¹⁵ The questions from most scientists, often in laboratory settings with controlled variables and specialized settings, will result in answers generally well suited to the discrete sensible units of traditional empiricism. The questions from most religious believers, generally guided by church doctrines, will result in narratives that provide broad direction for steering through values choices. Surveying the array of human questions and answers, James remained aware that each begins in an encounter with abundant and elusive experiences. In light of that awareness, he remained fully open to the exact type of answers that laboratory science could provide, even as he reminded readers that the control in these settings limited their purview. He was also open to propositions about human experiences based on orientations that mainstream scientists generally call wholly unempirical ranging from religious beliefs to idealistic claims, volitional choices, motivations to extraordinary levels of energy, the therapeutic impact of intangible elements of mind, heart, and spirit, and even psychic experiences. These all show the tangible effects of non-material ingredients on material conditions, and whether endorsed or not, they are part of human experience, and call for scrutinizing inquiry. With his radical empiricism as his standard, he evaluated experience, initially chaotic, and needing discerning minds to understand into patterns for human interests, use, and problem solving.

By these empirical standards, religious positions, like scientific ones—or even any other non-scientific ones—would be judged, not by their origins, but by the consequences they bring; or as he summarized in the more evocative language of the Bible, “by their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.” And yet, even with his defense of religion against reductionist scientific skepticism, he was not ready to dismiss the medical materialists either. Their critiques offer helpful reminders not to treat religious experiences “as if they were outside of nature’s order altogether.”¹⁶ The materialist reduction of religion is actually a good first step, a reminder to

look at the psychological settings of beliefs, but not to mistake that step as the last word, while James explored spirituality as it circulates within the natural world.

EVERY PERSON HIS OR HER OWN MYSTIC

For all James's emphasis on the limits of human abilities, he also gave credit to human potential. The complexities of nature set limits on scientific insights, but the accomplishments have been many; religion faces deep cosmic mysteries, but its beliefs bring much insight, hope, and motivation. The whole forest may be trackless, but the trails of human construction are significant in themselves, especially for those living with their use, and with potential for still more insights. The human potential in religion is most clearly expressed in "mystical states of consciousness," because he proposed that mysticism sits at the "root and centre" of "personal religious experience." While these states of consciousness in their most explicit and dramatic forms are august and rare, he offers clues about their wider availability. The hither side of mysticism in depth psychology means that, although deep, it is a feature of human psychology. And so, "religious melancholy, whatever peculiarities it may have *qua* religious, is at any rate melancholy. Religious happiness is happiness. Religious trance is trance."¹⁷ The continuity with everyday consciousness suggests that mystical states reside in potential throughout humanity.

James's own relation with mysticism offers illustration of its degree of availability. He admitted that "my own constitution shuts me out from [mystical experiences] almost entirely." The "almost," however, indicates a small degree of mysticism: he asserted that "there is *something in me which makes response* when I hear utterances from that quarter." He called this "my mystical germ," which is after all a seed, small but with great potential; and then he generalized: "it is a very common germ." Enlisting his philosophical objections to absolutism, he observed that such thinking applied to religion has meant that many observers assume that "mystical deliverances must be infallible revelations in every particular, or nothing." This all-or-nothing approach feeds both religious absolutism with its hierarchy of religious adepts, and secular absolutists with their charge that mystical experiences really "are nothing" but perhaps the imaginative outcropping of physiological peculiarities. James the pluralist was content to observe small steps wherever they appeared; "why may they not be *something*, although not everything?"¹⁸ Hence, the mystical germ.

And that something, in James, in mystics, and in ordinary folks, is by definition ineffable; it “defies expression,” but “must be directly experienced.” Moreover, “it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.” In fact, even having a ready particular description is a sure sign of its lack of presence; by contrast, James’s own hesitancy to claim his own mystical states actually offered a mark in favor of his mystical authenticity, albeit in degrees. No wonder this religion at first hand is so much less frequent than religion at second hand, with its theologies and institutions; like conceptions compared to the abundance of experience, those rational and social structures are so much easier to communicate and organize. Just as different people tap mystical sensibilities in different amounts, so too do mystical experiences emerge in any one life in degrees, ranging from “phenomena which claim no special religious significance” to “those of which the religious pretensions are extreme.” He called this the “mystical ladder.” The smallest germs resemble everyday psychology; “the simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim.” It may even be something heard many times but which on one particular hearing commands new attention, to which we might blurt out, “I never realized its full meaning until now.” As with his “Will to Believe,” these insights are not new, but there is a newly awakened sense of their “living,” even “momentous” significance. Some places on the mystical ladder, James admits, lead to “dreamy states,” disconnected with waking reality, and may even suggest insanity. And there are artificial mystical states from intoxicants; alcohol and drugs have the “power to stimulate the mystical faculties,” and under their influence they offer “one bit of the mystic consciousness.” Less artificial sources include “certain aspects of nature,” which have “a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods.”¹⁹

With mysticism’s array of intersections with normal psychology, James was sure that “even the least mystical” of his audience would be “convinced of the existence of mystical moments as states of consciousness” within human experience, even as he also admitted that in full flower, “the deliciousness of some of these states seem to be beyond anything known in ordinary consciousness.” No matter their degree, “mystical conditions ... render the soul more energetic,” and of course such enrichments of life occur in degrees as well. All these states of mind, from the most religious to the least, including both the “classic mysticism and [the] lower mysticisms[,] spring from the same mental level, from the great subliminal ... region,” available to all.²⁰

For all his eagerness to promote mystical possibilities more democratically to a wider pool of the population, James still regarded the most profound mystical experiences as worthy of greater degrees of attention. Such people may serve as leaders of communities, just as the truly extraordinary have been founders of religious movements. They “point in directions to which the religious sentiments even of non-mystical men incline.” If religion at its best draws out the best in humanity, those with the deepest experience of personal religion remind the rest of us, so often distracted, “of the supremacy of the ideal.” Those possibilities “we may voluntarily ignore,” but we cannot erase because they are within us, in germinal form.²¹ They remain mere seedlings for most because of personal habits or the power of traditions, which serve as the collected habits of a cultural community. Even James’s attention to religious elites has had democratic implications to the degree that the extraordinary few have served not just as distant icons but also as models for all to follow.

In his religious texts, for all of the democratic possibilities of the mystical germ in all of us, it is not very common in practice. James does not much explore this gap in practice, except for his implication that the belief states are available if they just be willed; the mystical germ remains present if fostered or not. In his other writings, however, he does explore traits that make it rare in daily practice. Habits offer great stability, serving as “the enormous fly-wheel[s] of society”; but they can also inhibit innovation and critical thinking. No wonder he supported a tonic winnowing of religious traditions to identify their richest, healthiest parts. Moreover, in his own life, he cultivated assertions of will as ways to deepen his expression of the “spiritual self,” and an impulse to live “without any guarantee” as a way to remain open to life’s possibilities. Although he said that prayer made him feel “foolish and artificial,” during his youthful troubles, he found “one fine prayer” that he recorded in his diary for frequent reference: “Now God help me through this! for you know that I am in the right and you see that I am trying to help myself.”²² Rather than a supplication for pious guarantees, this was a prayer to boost his willful motivations.

When James did have his few dramatic spiritual experiences, he simply let their array of insights “whirl ... inexplicably together”—after all, “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance.” For himself, he could not discern any immediate direct message, but the insights remained a “boulder of impression,” and they confirmed and amplified his vocational drive do his writing and speaking. He acknowledged that having any great impact was “well nigh

impossible,” but “to attempt is *my* religious act.” Even with such efforts, and even with this personal commitment to their significance, James crucially added the importance of not staking too much on the final accomplishments of any such effort: the “results sh[oul]d not be too voluntarily aimed at or too busily thought of.” This would be his own guiding spiritual path, the expression of his own mystical germ: act in life true to one’s purpose, and don’t expect results; this resolution, he declared, has had a “potent effect in my inner life.”²³ That’s a spiritual habit that can foster a little bit of mysticism in everyone.

Just as James proposed that pragmatism offers “an alteration in ‘the seat of authority’ that reminds one almost of the protestant reformation,” so his religious thought offers a kind of modern reformation, not a protesting one, but an affirming one. In place of the Protestant cry, “every man his own priest,” James offers the inspiration that every person is, in degrees, potentially, his or her own mystic. Protestantism sought to take religious devotion out of the monasteries and bring it into everyday life, and James suggests that a universal religious potential offers the chance for mystical inspiration in all. British poet and critic T. E. Hulme coined the phrase “spilt religion” to characterize romantic thinking as a humanistic substitute for religion; Hulme’s insight offers a way of thinking about modern secularity not as religious decline, but as its expansion into everyday secular life.²⁴ In the same way, James’s psychological focus can enable religious seekers to take on the insights of mystics, to elevate even everyday personal experiences with the energy and hopefulness of mysticism.

With great spiritual powers and their great possibilities also come great responsibilities. These depth experiences of the subliminal and in mysticism can enlighten, but they can also include the dangers of misdirected and hurtful messages. James offers some wise guidance for sorting out the swirls at these depths: authentic religion “favors gravity”; it “says ‘hush’ to all vain chatter and smart wit”; it provides “a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life”; it takes the form of “lyrical enchantment” or “earnestness”; it offers “an assurance of safety and a temper of peace”; and it comes with “a preponderance of loving affections.”²⁵ These can serve as standards for separating the spiritual wheat from the depth psychology chaff. Whether one agrees with James’s high hopes for democratized spilt mysticism, or remains skeptical of its possibilities or merits, a less structured and more personal approach to religion has been on the rise ever since James’s time, and this religion of spirituality has become a particularly powerful

force in recent decades. Often breaking with tradition or demanding renewal within church structures, a personal approach to spirituality has been dispersing within this generation of seekers; the religion of the few is ready to become the religion of the pew—or spirituality beyond church walls. In the recent religious landscape, the mystical germ has sprouted. The challenge of our time will be to rise to the demands, welcome the possibilities, and scrutinize the illuminations posed by the call of the mystic within that William James forecast a century ago.

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NOTES

¹ James, “The Energies of Men” (1906), ERM, 131.

² There are rich resources for understanding James’s approaches to religion. Bixler, *Religion in the Philosophy of William James*; and Clebsch, “The Human Religiousness of William James,” emphasize his connection to liberal and humanist religion, a theme scrutinized by Kittelstrom, “Too Hidebound”; Schmidt, *Restless Souls*; and White, *Unsettled Minds*. Vanden Burgt, *Religious Philosophy of William James*; Suckiel, *Heaven’s Champion*; and Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith*, assess his religion in terms of his pragmatism. O’Connell, *William James on the Courage to Believe*; Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief*; Hollinger, “James, Clifford, and the Scientific Conscience”; and Christian, “Lessons from James’s Debate with Clifford,” evaluate his “will to believe.” Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*; and Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, study the role of radical empiricism in his religion. Ruf, *The Creation of Chaos*; and Ramsey, *Submitting to Freedom*, present James’s religion, especially his *Varieties*, in relation to his psychology. Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James*; and the essays in Proudfoot, ed., *William James and a Science of Religion*, evaluate the psychology of his social scientific study of religion. Niebuhr portrays the “inarticulate feelings of reality” (222) in “William James on Religious Experience.” Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, evaluates James’s mysticism in philosophical and secular

terms; and Barnard *Exploring Unseen Worlds*; and Johnson, “James’s Concept of Mystical Consciousness” provide more sympathetic readings of his spirituality; while Gale identifies James’s mysticism as one side of the deeply *Divided Self of William James*. A number of scholars point to James’s application of pluralism and his metaphysics of field theory to religion for a portrait of a finite divinity, including Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality*; and Lamberth, “Interpreting the Universe.” Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness*; and Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, depict James’s religion in relation to his depth psychology. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*; and Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*, present recent uses of James’s ideas. Questions about the democratic qualities of James’s religion have led to a key question of this article, To what extent were the resources of James’s religious insights, so thoroughly evaluated in these works, available to the average religious citizen?

³ Turner, *Religion Enters the Academy*; Santorum in Caldwell, “Without Reference to ‘Snobs’.”

⁴ WB, 13-14 and 80; VRE, 33-34, 269, and 268.

⁵ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 25, 100. On spiritual dimensions of religion away from institutional structures and toward individual exploration, see Catherine Albanese, ed., *American Spiritualities*; Wuthnow, *After Heaven*; Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*; and *A Generation of Seekers*; and Schmidt, *Restless Souls*. On the cultural appetite for affordable luxuries, see Twitchell, *Living it Up*; and Frank, *Luxury Fever*, for critique of the trend.

⁶ VRE, 268. The distinction between transcendence and immanence is so widely used that it is often assumed or mentioned in passing; it receives more attention in Eliade, *The Sacred*

and the Profane; and Pelikan, *What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*; and Kim, in “Transcendence and Immanence,” emphasizes that the orientations are not mutually exclusive, even as some religious beliefs emphasize one or the other.

⁷ VRE, 170, 402; WB, 19. On James and the subliminal, see Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness*, 87-88; Trochu, “Investigations into the William James Collection at Harvard”; and Taves, “Religious Experience and the Divisible Self.”

⁸ VRE, 404, 405, 384, and 397.

⁹ VRE, 400. Berry, in *The Dream of the Earth*, coined the term “inscendence,” to remind humanity of its “pre-rational, ... instinctive resources,” which provide a “genetic imperative” for integrity with nature. However, with this term, he does not draw upon the theory of the subliminal, which provides a psychological prelude to his search for inner resources to increase humanity’s environmental “survival capacity” (207-208). On James’s views of the objective truth of the objects of religious beliefs encountered in the subliminal, see Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions*, 269-95 and 255-60; and Johnson, “James’s Concept of Mystical Consciousness”; and see Oppenheim’s contrasting depiction of James whose investigations have “rendered otiose any appeal to something beyond”; *Reverence For the Relations of Life*, 79.

¹⁰ PPS, 462; ERE, 17; SPP, 32-34; and ERE, 4. John Dewey called the belief of traditional empiricists (and earlier philosophers) in discrete units of sensation that the mind could perceive in the world with immediacy and directness, the “spectator theory of knowledge”; Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, 19. Myers, in *William James*, offers the reminder that the human organization of sensations into concepts takes a long time beyond infancy, and the proposition that James viewed concepts as mental action on elements of reality already

somewhat disclosed in sensation (84). And indeed, James declared “whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the objects before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes . . . out of our own head” (PPS, 747). Unlike empiricists he did not think natural facts were readily available to the senses, because of the vastness and complexity of reality; this is what Myers calls his almost “mystical conception of sensation,” his awareness of its uncharted abundance (86). James’s insistence on the part of perception derived from the objective world was a feature of his decided reaction against philosophies of abstraction; his philosophy demanded evaluation of the tangible world despite its elusiveness.

¹¹ ERE, 17 and 18; SPP, 33 and 32. James explained the distinctive role of diverse interest and mental selection in the human mind in “Brute and Human Intellect,” EPS, 1-37; “Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence,” and “The Sentiment of Rationality,” EPY, 7-22 and 32-64, essays from 1878-1879 that, along with Charles Peirce’s “Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” published in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1877 and 1878 respectively (*Writings of Charles Peirce*, 3:242-257 and 257-276), are widely regarded as the first statements of pragmatism; see Thayer, *Meaning and Action*, 143; Smith, *Purpose and Thought*, 195-197; McDermott, *The Writings of William James*, 817; and Myers, *William James*, 89 and 270.

¹² James, “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results” (1898); and “What Pragmatism Means,” PRG, 258 and 32. James’s own emphasis on mystery provides a way to steer through debates about whether James himself was (and whether pragmatism in general is) relativistic on objective reality and in epistemology; see for example the debate between Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism*, 136, 144, and 131 ; and “Pragmatism and the Historians” versus

Kloppenber, “The Authority of Evidence” and Westbrook, “The Authority of Pragmatism”; and between Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*; versus Misak, ed., *New Pragmatists*. James’s awareness of mystery was a check on his confidence in our grasp of objective reality even as his commitment to the human achievements within the mystery served as a check on any turn to subjective relativity; and the awareness of human limitation compared to tracts of mystery shows a significance for religion in philosophical thought; factoring mystery into philosophy offers the reminder of the presence of what is absent in our knowledge, our beliefs, our virtues, our abilities, or any of our achievements.

¹³ WB, 7; and Hollinger, “Tonic Destruction.”

¹⁴ VRE, 20.

¹⁵ VRE, 24 and 25; “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879), EPH, 35; and PPS, 956.

¹⁶ VRE, 25 (quoting Matthew, 7:20, King James version) and 28. Myers offers the surprised analysis that, after the *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James simultaneously turned “to a metaphysics congenial to religion” while also “intensifying [his] physiological analysis” (*William James*, 254). His interest in religion and science and in spirituality within psychology explain the apparent paradox.

¹⁷ VRE, 301 and 28.

¹⁸ VRE, 301; and James to James Leuba, April 17, 1904, Perry, *Thought and Character*, 2:350-351 (portions of letter also in LWJ, 2:211-212, and CWJ, 10:395-396).

¹⁹ VRE, 302, 301, 327, 303, 304, 303, 305, 307, and 312. On James’s own mystical experiences and his experimentation with drugs, see Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 25-34; and Nelson, “The Artificial Mystic State of Mind.” James not only showed interest in “drug-

induced states,” especially the dulling of “discriminative and analytic power” that they induce, but also detected a resemblance between these states of consciousness and pure experience; Myers called this position evidence of his almost “mystical conception of sensation” (*William James*, 86).

²⁰ VRE, 316, 327, 329, and 337-8.

²¹ VRE, 339.

²² PPS 125 and 283; James to Alice Howe Gibbens [the future Alice Gibbens James], June 7, [18]77, CWJ, 4:571; James, response to James B. Pratt, “Questionnaire” (1904) on personal religious beliefs (also in LWJ, 2:214); Diary 1, May 1, 1868, 48, James papers.

²³ James to Alice Gibbens James, July 9, 1898; to Frances Morse, April 12, 1900; to Thomas Ward, Jan[uar]y, [18]68; to Ward, April [1869], CWJ, 8:390; 9:186; 4:250; and 4:371; and VRE, 303.

²⁴ PRG, 62; Hulme, *Speculations*, 118; on secularity as expansion of religion into worldly life since the romantic era, see Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*.

²⁵ VRE 39, 382-3.