

William James on Religion and God: An Introduction to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

M. Gerald Bradford

William James (1842–1910) was a remarkable individual. He combined profound intellectual talents and brilliant gifts—especially as a writer and a teacher—with a genuine humanity. His personality was irrepressible and fully present in his writings. Based primarily on his pioneering two-volume work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890)—which helped establish the discipline in this country and abroad and out of which grew his own distinctive philosophical view of the world; his companion study of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); his celebrated *Pragmatism* (1907); and his other writings—James established himself as a world-renowned psychologist and philosopher.¹ We continue to learn more about James as a thinker and a person as more of his voluminous correspondence becomes available.² He remains the subject of a number of major biographies and important studies.³

While James was interested in a wide range of issues, we know that the subjects he dealt with in depth were of vital importance to him. Jamesian scholars are increasingly of the opinion that a survey of the entire sweep of his intellectual achievements reveals “that two subjects continued to engage his attention from beginning to end—religion and human nature.”⁴ In connection with these interests, he also worked out a distinctive view of God, what I call his “practical theism.”⁵

As a Latter-day Saint, I find much of what James says about religion to be close to the mark. Moreover, I find many of his ideas about God to have certain affinities with how deity can be viewed from a Latter-day Saint perspective. I was first introduced to James years ago by Truman G. Madsen. Madsen, it turns out, is a long-time student of James.

For those interested in reflections on Latter-day Saint thought and teachings, particularly in comparison with the views of others, no one in this generation has had a greater impact or made a more lasting impression than Truman Madsen. His reputation in this regard rests largely on the influence of his book *Eternal Man*. First published in the mid-1960s as a series of articles and later in 1966 as a book, *Eternal Man* contains Madsen’s musings on a number of issues or, as he terms them, “anxieties” about the human condition—issues ranging from ideas about human beginnings, problems of identity and self-awareness, and the mind-body problem to the issue of human freedom and the problem of evil and human suffering. Madsen’s objective is straightforward: to show how these concerns can be framed differently and to pose possible alternative resolutions as a result of viewing such matters from the perspective of Latter-day Saint belief in the premortal existence of man, particularly as Madsen understands this belief (taking his cue largely from the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith). While his focus, of course, is on the eternal nature of man, Madsen also shows how distinctive Latter-day Saint views of deity can profoundly alter our thinking about such issues. It is interesting to contemplate how Madsen’s understanding of James may have helped him think through these issues.

In 1951 at the University of Utah, Madsen wrote his master’s thesis in philosophy on James; it is entitled “The Ethics of William James.” In his chapter “God and the Moral Life,” Madsen deals at some length with James’s views on God. Madsen points out that James rejects such ideas as “infinite,” “transcendent,” “principle,” “absolute essence,” “first cause,” and “law” in reference to the concept of God and instead argues that we need to think of God as having, quoting James, “an environment, being in time and working out a history just like ourselves.”⁶

Madsen emphasizes that, for James, the most important thing about God is that we can be intimately related with him: "In whatever other respects the divine personality may differ from ours or may resemble it, the two are consanguineous at least in this—that both have purposes for which they care, and each can hear the other's call."⁷ Madsen observes that, for James, it is in direct experiences with the divine, not in creedal expressions or theological abstractions, that we come to a proper understanding of God. Furthermore, Madsen correctly points out that while James's conclusions about God are always couched in tentative language, he seems sure of two things: (1) that God is real because he produces real effects in our lives, and (2) a correct understanding of God requires that we talk about him in qualified terms. God is both ideality and actuality. He is finitistic and attainable by acts of will as well as by psychological processes. Madsen concludes that, for James, God makes faith in the "seen world's goodness" possible, he lets loose in us the "strenuous mood," and he represents the "finally valid casuistic scale" upon which our right conduct must ultimately be founded and judged. God, in other words, is the final sanction of ethical conduct.

A year after he earned his Ph.D. in the history and philosophy of religion from Harvard, Madsen published an essay on James entitled "William James: Philosopher-Educator."⁸ Then in 1976 he wrote and presented a paper on James entitled "The Lost Dimension of Psychology: William James Revisited" at the annual American Psychological Association meetings held in Washington, D.C.

In his classic study of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James deals in depth with religion and God, along with a host of other subjects. This essay is an introduction to *Varieties*. My objective is threefold: following a brief outline of the work, I reconstruct the general theory about religion that James advances. Next, I try to clarify what he says about God. Finally, I address the issue of the religious availability of his practical theism. To those reading *Varieties* for the first time and to others already familiar with this work, my hope is that this summary of James's views will awaken in some and reinforce in others an appreciation of what we can learn from this important thinker.

The Varieties of Religious Experience

***Varieties* is, in large measure, a continuation of James's earlier psychological investigations.⁹ It is also a work in the philosophy of religion. His goal is to describe religion in all its variety and to justify its worth.¹⁰ He takes a very broad view of his subject and acknowledges that his interpretation of religion is not fully adequate to the task, given the abundance and variety of religious experiences. Nevertheless, he puts forth a general theory about religion to account for and unify the rich variety of documentary evidence he has collected and, on the basis of this, concludes with what he takes to be true and distinctive about religion. Unquestionably, what James says about God in *Varieties* contributes significantly to the overall development of his distinctive view of God.**

James's genius is evident in his imaginative and insightful use of selections from the material he has collected and in his vivid and descriptive ongoing commentary, every bit as much as it is evident in the way he develops and articulates the theoretical aspects of the work. He collected accounts depicting a range of human experiences, not just religious experiences. He assembled, for example, expressions of loss and despair, panic, fear; feelings of nothingness, spiritual torment, skepticism, and doubt; instances of happiness; dramatic accounts of conversions—religious and otherwise; acts of heroism; occurrences of ecstatic surrender and aesthetic feelings; accounts of sacrifice and confession; expressions of prayer and worship; and descriptions of various forms of inspiration. He relied on the writings of firsthand participants and qualified observers and drew on accounts from adherents of both Western and Eastern traditions. He collected material from the lives of saints, writers, poets, philosophers, theologians, religious founders, mystics, artists, and ordinary people. And he included accounts from Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Latter-day Saints, Hindus, Buddhists, Christian Scientists, Transcendentalists, Quakers, atheists, neurotics, and many others.

Varieties consists of twenty lectures. In his initial lecture, James roughly spells out what he intends to do and sketches his experiential approach to the study of religion. His focus is on the personal dimension of religion rather than on religious institutions and thought; he is interested in more developed and vivid expressions of firsthand religious life—religious feelings and impulses, states of mind, and experiences as recorded in individual works of piety and autobiography—by those for whom religion “exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever,” those individuals he calls “religious geniuses” (p. 15).

James tells us he will rely on what can be observed psychologically, even biologically, in the life of the religious person and on what the person says about his own experiences. He employs an “empirical test,” one that judges the significance of the religious life by its “fruits not its roots.” Following his conviction that our perceptual-active level of experiencing the world is what is fundamental and is the basis for determining what is real, meaningful, and of value, his approach does not rely on deductive methods or on various theories about the origins of religion; rather, he explores and compares the full range of religious experience as it is immediately given and, as much as possible, in the context of lived experiences. He looks, in other words, to the future, to the consequences of such experiences in the lives of individuals. James asks, “when we think certain states of mind superior to others, is it ever because of what we know concerning their organic antecedents?” And he quickly answers, “No!” “It is always for two entirely different reasons. It is either because we take an immediate delight in them; or else it is because we believe them to bring us good consequential fruits for life” (p.21). The significance of religious experiences can only be

ascertained by spiritual judgments directly passed upon them, judgments based on our own immediate feeling primarily; and secondarily on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true.

Immediate luminousness, in short, *philosophical reasonableness*, and *moral helpfulness* are the only available criteria. (p.23, James’s emphasis)

In his second lecture, James puts forth his working definition of “religion” and the object of religious experience, the “divine.” For him, religious experiences are special instances of human experience of a much wider scope. They are best seen as expressions of our various moods and aims used to constitute a higher order of meaning. That which makes an experience religious is not so much in the psychophysical makeup of the individual as it is in the *object* that is experienced, as *experienced*, and in the nature of our *reactions* to the object. James stipulates that for the purposes of his lectures he means by “religion” those “*feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*” (p.34, James’s emphasis). It is best, he says, to speak of religion as a person’s “total reaction upon life.” Here the individual goes behind the

foreground of existence and reach[es] down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses. This sense of the world’s presence, appealing as it does to our peculiar individual temperament, makes us either strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large; and our reaction . . . is the completest of all our answers to the question, “What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?” It expresses our individual sense of it in the most definite way. (pp.36–37)

And since not all “total reactions” are religious, “there must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse” (p.39). The emphasis here is on *solemnity*.

Building on this meaning of religion, James stipulates that by the “divine” he means “not merely the primal and enveloping and real, for that meaning if taken without restriction might well prove too broad. The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest” (p. 39). Then, by comparing and contrasting accounts of religious experience where the divinity of the object and the solemnity of the reaction are too well marked for doubt, we are most likely to find that “element or quality in them which we can meet nowhere else” (p. 44).

The “reality of the unseen” is the focus of the third lecture. One of the subjects James turns to time and again in *Varieties* is his distinction between ordinary consciousness and a wider, subliminal, or transmarginal consciousness –what, most of the time, he calls the subconscious and what Eugene Taylor calls “consciousness beyond the margin.”¹¹ Our ordinary states of consciousness reveal to us the ordinary, everyday world. But James thinks there is sufficient evidence to enable us to speak of other states of consciousness, ones that make us aware of another, wider world, a reality or order that is unseen. Speaking of this wider consciousness, he suggests that for some of us, some of the time, it is as if we have a “*sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call ‘something there,’*” more deep and more general than any of our particular senses can reveal. On the basis of this we sometimes speak of religious individuals possessing the objects of their belief in the form of quasi-sensible realities, directly apprehended. James points out that these “feelings” of an unseen reality are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experience can be. Moreover, for those who have them, and have them strongly, the probability is that they cannot help regarding them as genuine perceptions of truth, as revelations of a kind of reality that no adverse argument, however unanswerable, can dispel (see pp.55, 59, 66, James’s emphasis).¹² Based on this, he offers, at this early stage in his study, a preliminary observation, anticipating what he will say in his concluding lecture: “Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul” (p.51).

In the next four lectures, in the context of how individuals grapple with evil, suffering, and opposition in life, James compares and contrasts what he calls “healthy-minded individuals,” those who are “once-born” in terms of how they deal with the world, and “sick souls,” those “twice-born” individuals whose troubled dealings with the world result in their longing to be reborn. He appears to have two primary reasons for spending as much time as he does on healthy-mindedness and on what he calls the religion of healthy-mindedness, given that after this he never returns to the subject again. In the first place, while he holds that a healthy-minded approach to the world answers real psychological needs on the part of many of us most of the time, he nevertheless concludes that this perspective is an inferior form of religiosity and is also found wanting philosophically because of its inability to come to terms with the reality of evil and suffering. Second, his detailed treatment of the religion of healthy-mindedness and his sensitive handling of its strengths and weaknesses allows him, in rather dramatic fashion, to compare and contrast this with what, in the last analysis, he considers to be the more complete form of spirituality –namely, those religious traditions (particularly Buddhism and Christianity) that answer to the needs of the sick souls of this world.

For James, it is the religion of the sick soul that ranges over the wider scale of experiences, best develops the pessimistic elements of life, and best comes to terms with the reality of evil. This form of spirituality reveals more

about the human condition than any other form of religious expression. In fact, the religion of the sick soul becomes normative for James for the balance of his study. James seems personally to have identified with this type of personality. His discussion of the divided self and unification, or conversion; of the qualities of saintliness, mysticism, prayer, and other religious characteristics; and finally of his development of a general theory about religion and his thinking about God are all done in terms of this distinctive form of religiosity.

In lectures 8, 9, and 10, James again turns to the sick soul, only this time in terms of the more abstract notion of the divided self and the various ways in which such individuals achieve a radical transformation of their lives. The focus is on those experiences some have, beginning with a heightened sense of how dissatisfied they are in identifying with their present, lower (meaning inferior), divided self. This very awareness, James argues, is evidence of an apprehension on their part of a higher (meaning better) self with which they can potentially identify. For some, this transformation process continues to the point where, in fact, they are able to identify with a new, higher self and thereby overcome their prior divided state. James calls these profound personality changes “conversion” experiences. In this context, James further develops his distinction between ordinary consciousness and a wider consciousness. This distinction and his use of the concept of the subconscious play a central role in his account of conversion experiences and in what he eventually concludes about the distinctiveness and truth of religion.

While focusing on conversion experiences associated with the religion of the sick soul and by emphasizing the more involuntary and sudden changes experienced by some of these individuals in contrast to the voluntary and gradual kinds of change that others undergo, James makes a number of observations: In these cases individuals often talk as if it is their higher self—that which is emerging, that which is being “born”—that takes the lead in the transformation process. It is this higher self that is influenced by the divine; moreover, the subconscious is the means by which divine influence is experienced. Also, these individuals, more often than not, admit that the unification they have achieved—their being born anew—did not come about by reliance on their own volition or resources; rather, it was realized as a result of a self-surrender on their part, by “letting go.”

In lectures 11 through 15, James deals with “Saintliness,” using this term very broadly as the name for those expressions of charity, devotion, trust, patience, and bravery found in varying degrees in most religious persons. These characteristics run the gamut from the highest instances of human heroism, achievement, and sacrifice to, unfortunately, what can result when such qualities are taken to extremes—for instance, fanaticism, bigotry, self-denial, or a morbid inability to deal with the world. These five lectures, as a group, constitute a preliminary conclusion in two respects: First, James appraises the value of religion in the lives of many individuals in terms of human nature and human social development over the course of history and concludes that the “best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show. . . . The saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world’s welfare” (pp.210, 299). These individuals represent not only the genuinely strenuous life but also a more authentic life. Second, he produces a “composite photograph” of spiritual emotions common to all “saints” and “present in all religions”:

- 1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power. . . .**
- 2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.**
- 3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.**
- 4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards “yes, yes,” and away from “no” where the claims of the non-ego are concerned. (pp.219–20)**

These beliefs and experiences, he says, have practical consequences in the lives of religious individuals, reflected in various forms of asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity.

Having reached this interim conclusion, James spells out the basis upon which he will determine whether what religion claims is true. In lectures 16, 17, and 18, he deals with the phenomenon of mysticism and the role philosophy can play in better understanding and justifying religion. His chief interest in mystical experiences is whether they might form a “warrant for the truth” of that form of religion in which the sick soul is rescued through a second birth. Returning to the theme of his initial lectures, where he criticizes other approaches to the study of religion, James argues that if philosophy could shed its penchant for metaphysical speculations, for coming to conclusions in such matters on the basis of a priori definitions and deductions—what he calls instances of “high-flying speculation”—and adopt instead a method of criticism and induction, or, in other words, transform itself into what he calls a “science of religion,” then real progress could be made in understanding religion. It seems evident that James sees himself doing precisely this.

In lecture 19 he deals with other characteristics of religion, chiefly prayer. For James, the genuineness of religion is indissolubly bound up with the question of whether prayerful consciousness “is or is not deceitful.” The conviction that something is genuinely transacted to consciousness is at the very core of living religion.

For the most part, James confines his theoretical reflections about religion and God to his conclusions (lecture 20) and his postscript.¹³ Here he sums up his major contentions: there really are multiple states of consciousness, and, on the basis of this, there is clear evidence of a wider world, an unseen reality or order, from which the visible world draws its significance. For those of us who are religious, our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves to this unseen reality. Prayer or inner communion with this wider world is a means by which work really is done and by which spiritual energy flows into this visible world and produces real effects, psychological and material. Those who are the beneficiaries of these influences experience a new zest for life in the form of either lyrical enchantment or an appeal to earnestness and heroism and realize an assurance of safety, a temper of peace, and a preponderance of loving affection for others. James explains how his idea of the subconscious provides an answer to how such a “harmonious adjustment” is possible, puts forth his general theory about religion and his first hypothesis about God, and argues for the truth of both. Finally, he summarizes what else he thinks we can conclude about God.

James reveals something of his own perspective in *Varieties* and something about what he personally means by God in a letter to his friend, Henry W. Rankin, written 16 June 1901, just as he was finishing the delivery of his first ten lectures at Edinburgh.

In these lectures the ground I am taking is this: The mother sea and fountain head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense. All theologies and all ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths superimposed; and the experiences make such flexible combinations with the intellectual prepossessions of their subject, that one may almost say that they have no proper *intellectual* deliverance of their own, but belong to a region deeper, & more vital and practical, than that which the intellect inhabits. For this they are also indestructible by intellectual arguments and criticisms. I attach the mystical or religious consciousness to the possession of an extended subliminal self with a thin partition through which messages make irruption. We are thus made convincingly aware of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous. The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we thence receive help us to live, they found invincible assurance of a world beyond the senses, they melt our

hearts and communicate significance and value to everything and make us happy. They do this for the individual who has them, and other individuals follow him. Religion in this way is absolutely indestructible. Philosophy and theology give their conceptual interpretations of this experiential life. The farther margin of the subliminal field being unknown, it can be treated as by Transcendental Idealism, as an Absolute mind with a part of which we coalesce, or by Xian [Christian] theology, as a distinct deity acting on us. Something, not our immediate self, *does* act on our life! So I seem doubtless to my audience to be blowing hot & cold, explaining away Xianity [Christianity], yet defending the more general basis from which I say it proceeds.¹⁴

James's General Theory about Religion

In *Varieties*, James embarks on yet another course in his ongoing effort to learn more about human nature and the human condition—hence the subtitle of the book: *A Study in Human Nature*. Among other things, he meant the subtitle to emphasize his thesis that one major function of religion is to confront us with the question of our individual destinies. As he puts it,

The pivot round which the religious life, as we have traced it, revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. . . . The gods [that are] believed in—whether by crude savages or by men disciplined intellectually—agree with each other in recognizing personal calls. Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being, in the world of religion, the one fundamental fact. Today quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns. (p.387)

Religion forces us to look to the future and to consider the darker aspects of life, the vulnerabilities and mysteries of life. How we experience the world is never fully determined in advance. Rather, life presents itself as a vague, undetermined, incomplete world horizon. Elemental life really is mysterious and precarious; it is our familiarity with aspects of life that blunts our sensitivity to this. The more we can understand about life, the more we might be able to understand about the divine. For James, “however particular questions connected with our individual destinies may be answered, it is only by acknowledging them as genuine questions, and living in the sphere of thought which they open up, that we become profound. But to live thus is to be religious” (p.394).

James begins articulating his general theory about religion by asking two different kinds of questions: First, what does religion in general reveal about our individual destinies? Does it reveal anything distinct enough to be considered a general message for humankind? Put another way, what role does religion play in diagnosing the human condition? Second, could such a common message or diagnosis be true? His answer to the first set of questions is that most religions seem to agree that many individuals experience themselves in a state of uneasiness—in other words, they are divided selves. Reduced to its simplest terms, the claim is that at least for some of us, something is wrong about us as we naturally stand. Furthermore, religion claims that there is a solution to this state of uneasiness—namely, that some of these divided selves can be made whole, can be reborn. As James puts it, “*we are saved from this wrongness* by making proper connexion with higher powers” (p.400, James’s emphasis).

What this means is that such individuals, insofar as they suffer from their wrongness and criticize it, are “to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exists” (p.400). In other words, these individuals, in sensing their own helpless state, become at the same time aware of a better, “higher part” of themselves, even if initially they are not certain whether they can identify with this higher self. Furthermore, this crucial experience is such that these individuals apprehend this higher part of themselves as being intimately related to something other than themselves, “a more of the same quality.” For James, some of

these individuals eventually identify their “real self” with this germinal higher part of themselves and, what is equally important, “become conscious that this higher part is coterminous and continuous with a more of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck” (p.400, James’s emphasis).

All the important phenomena of religious life are summed up in these general terms, according to James. They allow for the divided self and the struggle for unification or conversion; they involve the change of personal center and the surrender of one’s lower self, along with an appreciation of how the new self that is born is not the old self in a new guise; they express an apprehension of the exteriority of a helping power and account for our sense of union with it; and they fully justify our newfound feelings of happiness, security, and peace.

James admits that, up to this point, he has been dealing only with psychological phenomena. “They possess, it is true, enormous biological worth. Spiritual strength really increases in the subject when he has them, a new life opens for him, and they seem to him a place of conflux where the forces of two universes meet; and yet this may be nothing but his subjective way of feeling things, a mood of his own fancy, in spite of the effects produced” (p.401).

The question is, what, if anything, is true about such experiences? When James turns to this question, he turns from consideration of the psychological and even biological makeup and function of religious experiences to the purported object of religious experience. In an important footnote at this juncture in his argument, he points out that he is using the term *truth* in this context to mean something *in addition to* the value for life that religion brings (see p. 401 n. 23). In other words, while an appeal to the psychological and biological consequences for life resulting from religious experiences is of vital importance, it is not sufficient to settle the question of the truth of such matters. Hence, James relies on what he calls his “reconciling hypothesis,” one, he argues, that stands beyond the differences existing among competing religious claims and yet is, at the same time, sufficiently in accord with the facts not to be dismissed out of hand. He puts forth his hypothesis, speaking very broadly and intentionally using the vague term *the more* to make reference to what he earlier called “the wider world, the unseen reality or order, the divine.” He is convinced his general theory can provide an explanation of religion that will explain matters, fit the facts, and yet not go beyond the evidence. The central questions are, “Is such a ‘more’ merely our own notion or does it really exist? If so, in what shape does it exist? Does it act, as well as exist? And in what form should we conceive of that ‘union’ with it of which religious geniuses are so convinced?” (p.401).

These are the kinds of questions that all religions ask. Nearly all religious persons agree that “the more” exists. Some claim that it exists as a personal god or gods; some conceive of it as an ideal tendency embedded in the eternal structure of the world. Nearly all agree that it acts as well as exists and that something real is effected when we throw our life into its hands. It is when “union” with this unseen reality is described that speculative differences begin to surface. And it is on this important point that James thinks his general theory can be expressed and defended without having to introduce any “over-beliefs”—his label for thoughts and ideas about the divine.

What is needed, James maintains, is a “definite description” into which terms like *the more* and our *union* with it can be translated. He obviously wants to avoid using the language of a particular religious tradition and turns to more neutral terms borrowed from psychology. The key concept here is the subconscious. He notes it is a well-accredited psychological entity; it is exactly the mediating notion he needs. James’s thesis implies that the phenomena of prayer, mystical consciousness, and conversion can all be understood as “invasions” from the subconscious, which itself stands under influences emanating from an unseen reality or order—a wider world. His reconciling hypothesis amounts to the following: “whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the ‘more’ with which in

religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (p.403, James’s emphasis).

James thinks this explanation has the advantage of providing a means for recognizing the insights of science—namely, the acknowledgment of the subconscious as a psychological fact, something comparable religious explanations often lack. At the same time, it vindicates the religious person’s conviction that in these experiences he is influenced by an external power. Invasions from the subconscious region are experienced by the religious person as encounters with that which is objective to him and suggests an external cause, if not control. Moreover, his hypothesis highlights the fact that since, in the religious life, such control is experienced as “higher” and since, on the basis of this explanation, it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden self—of our new emerging higher self—that are doing the controlling, we can conclude that “the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true” (p.403).

To open this particular door on the subject, James argues, is really all that such a general theory can do. If we were to step through the door and begin to talk in any detail about the nature and meaning of “the more,” we would, in effect, leave the field of theory formation and verification behind. Short of this, James concludes that “Disregarding the over-beliefs, and confining ourselves to what is common and generic, we have in *the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*, a positive content of religious experience, which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes*” (p.405, James’s emphasis). As it turns out, James thinks the testimony of religious experience can support one additional hypothesis, this time explicitly about God. I will turn to this next.

James on God

The linchpin that holds James’s general theory about religion together is his account of how some of us experience God. Earlier, in *The Will to Believe*, he raised the same issue—how can we portray our sense of being intimately related to God without lapsing into a view that implies we are somehow identified with God? At that time he argued, largely on conceptual grounds, that “anything more than God is impossible,” meaning that any view of our union with God that interprets such in a strict ontological sense is impossible. In *Varieties*, James arrives essentially at the same conclusion, but now he establishes his point on experiential grounds—on the basis of how we experience that which we take to be the divine. He thinks, as a psychologist, that it is not possible to say more about the object of religious experience than that “whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life” (p.403, James’s emphasis). To claim anything more about the farther side of God is to rely on one’s over-beliefs.

Speaking of over-beliefs, James points out how, for instance, mysticism, Vedantism, and transcendental idealism all put forth various monistic interpretations of how we are or become one with God, while other religious traditions defend alternative views. If we follow any one particular theological or philosophical view, we do so for a host of reasons, not the least of which is because we find such beliefs to be particularly compelling. Such over-beliefs, James says, are absolutely indispensable to one’s religion. Because of this we should always treat them with deference and tolerance. “The most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs” (p.405).

At this point James puts forth another hypothesis—that God is real. This time he labels it as one of his own over-beliefs. He returns to his earlier contention that, on occasion, the further limits of our consciousness plunge us into a dimension of reality altogether different from the sensible and merely “understandable” world. Such experiences absolutely overthrow the pretension of our ordinary or rationalistic states of consciousness to be the sole and ultimate dictator of what we may believe. Indeed, he argues that these other states of consciousness may prove to be superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and wider

world, “other orders of truth” to which we can respond in faith. And to the extent that our ideal impulses have their origin in this wider world, we belong to this world as well, since we belong in the most intimate sense possible wherever our ideals belong (see p.406).¹⁵ Furthermore, whenever we relate with this wider world, whenever we communicate with it, something really happens: work is done on our personalities, we are reborn, and real consequences follow in terms of how we conduct our lives and how we relate to others and to the world.

Then, on the grounds that that which produces real effects within another reality must be deemed a reality itself, James concludes that this wider world—God, if you will—is real. One of the consequences that follow from this is that, as James puts it, “we and God have business with each other.” In opening ourselves to God’s influence, we fulfill our deepest destiny. The world takes a turn for the better or the worse depending on whether or not we fulfill or evade God’s demands.

James then calls attention to another important consequence. While these real effects manifest themselves in the lives of individuals, their influence extends far beyond this. Religious individuals believe that they and the whole universe of beings to whom God is present are “secure in his parental hands.” That is, God’s existence is the guarantor of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may be destroyed; but if it is part of an ideal order, the ideal will be brought to fruition so that where God is, tragedy is only provisional, only partial. Shipwreck and dissolution, in other words, are not the final end of things (see p. 407). For James, only when this broader perspective is taken, only when this added step of faith concerning God is taken, only when remote, objective results are predicted can religion be freed from being viewed as merely a cluster of immediate firsthand experiences and begin to be seen as an approach to the world that makes a real difference, one that makes real claims about the way things are. If we view God only as that which enters into the religious individual’s experience of union with something higher than himself, then our view of deity is too small, too limited. To acknowledge God as the preserver of ideal values and as that which is incorporated into wider cosmic relations is really another way of saying that religion, functioning at its highest level, is not merely an illumination of facts already given elsewhere; it is not merely a passionate dimension of life that views things in a rosier light and has God as its object. It is all of these things, but it is much more! Religion, understood in this sense, postulates new facts. The world interpreted religiously is not the natural world taken over again. It is the world with something added—a world constituted differently, with different events, and requiring different conduct on our part. This view of religion is what we ordinarily mean by the term. This is the common man’s practical view of religion. Only philosophers and theologians think that they can make nature divine without adding any concrete detail to it and merely by calling it an expression of absolute spirit.

James believes that this practical, “pragmatic” way of viewing religion is the deeper view. “It gives it body as well as soul, it makes it claim, as everything real must claim, some characteristic realm of fact as its very own” (p.408). And while he is not certain what the other characteristics of God may turn out to be, he is confident that

The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. By being faithful in my poor measure to this over-belief, I seem to myself to keep more sane and true. . . . Assuredly, the real world is of a different temperament—more intricately built than physical science allows. So my objective and my subjective conscious both hold me to the over-belief which I express. Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks? (p.408)

But James, having come to the conclusion that God is real, does not let the matter rest. In his postscript, he steps further through the door he opened earlier and, while telling us more about where he is coming from, reveals some of his own over-beliefs about God.

James is intuitively suspicious of those who speculate about God—particularly those who come to conclusions about God based on a priori definitions and deductions and who, on the basis of this, work out full-fledged and elaborate theologies. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that in proceeding down this path he is cautious and speaks in a tentative, measured way. What he is confident about is that lives can be changed for the better. Furthermore, he is convinced that in some instances these changes come about precisely because individuals experience an unseen reality, an Ideal Power, something other than themselves with which they can be intimately related and in which they “find their greatest peace.” Initially, all James was willing to say about God is that he is real because he produces real effects in individuals’ lives. Now he ventures to say more about God, but only on the basis of what can be inferred from how individuals experience the divine and the differences these experiences make in terms of how they relate to others and the world.

If all thinkers were divided into the two classes of naturalists and supernaturalists, James tells us he would place himself among the supernaturalists. And then among this group, he would classify himself as a “piecemeal” or “crass” supernaturalist, thereby differentiating himself from those he calls “refined” supernaturalists. The latter acknowledge the reality of the ideal but bar it from interfering causally in the real world. According to this view, the ideal is not a world of facts, but of meanings only. It is a point of view for judging facts. In this view, no divine aid comes as a result of prayer; furthermore, this position too easily lapses back into a naturalism. It takes the claims of the physical sciences at face value. It leaves the laws of life as naturalism finds them, with no hope of remedy. It confines itself to sentiments *about life* as a *whole*—sentiments which, while admirable and adoring, need not be so, as evidenced by numerous pessimistic points of view. In other words, refined supernaturalists require that, for all intents and purposes, we dispense with practical religion. When proponents of this view conclude that “perhaps the best thing we can say about God is that he is the Inevitable Inference,” James observes that many individuals are more than willing to let such views of religion and deity simply evaporate. Would any martyrs “have sung in the flames for a mere inference, however inevitable it might be?” James asks. Religious personalities, like Saint Francis or Luther, James reminds us, “have usually been enemies of the intellect’s pretension to meddle with religious things” (p.396 n. 10). Indeed, for James, it is strange how, following the lead of refined supernaturalists, we define God as one who “can raise no particular weight whatever, who can help us with no private burden, and who is on the side of our enemies as much as he is on our own. Odd evolution from the God of David’s psalms!” (p.410 n. 1).¹⁶

This view of God comes about because refined supernaturalists demand that no concrete particular of experience should alter God’s nature; that God be viewed as relating to the world only en bloc, not in particular; and, in James’s happy phrase, that God be understood as doing “only a wholesale, not a retail business.” The obvious question is, what would it mean for something to exist that makes no difference in our world? Our whole interest in the question of whether God exists lies in what difference this would make in our lives. To illustrate his point, James calls attention to the Buddhist idea that all facts are under judgment of higher laws. Buddhists and other average religious individuals, he says, do not interpret the word *judgment* in an academic way. For them, judgment carries “*execution* with it, is *in rebus* as well as *post rem*, and operates ‘causally’ as partial factor in the total fact” (p.411, James’s emphasis). For James, judgment and execution do indeed go hand in hand. The only way the largest number of legitimate religious requirements are going to be met will be in terms of a piecemeal supernaturalism. In taking this position, James clearly sees himself in the minority and feels like a man who must set his back against an open door to prevent it from being slammed shut.

In answer to the question of what particular differences result from the fact of God's existence, James calls attention first to what prayerful communion immediately suggests—something ideal, which in one sense is part of ourselves but in another sense is not ourselves, which actually exerts influence, raises our center of personal energy, and produces regenerative effects unattained in other ways. "At these places at least, I say, it would seem as though transmundane energies, God, if you will, produced immediate effects within the natural world to which the rest of our experience belongs" (p.412).

Another difference is personal immortality. James readily admits, "Religion, in fact, for the great majority . . . *means* immortality, and nothing else" (p.412, James's emphasis), but he leaves this topic aside, focusing, instead, on yet another difference—on whether or not God must be viewed as infinite. In raising this issue, James moves further in the direction of spelling out some of the implications of his practical theism. He acknowledges that it is not uncommon to speak of God as the "one and only" and to conceive of God as being infinite. Yet, he asks, where is the warrant for jumping to this conclusion? "Religious experience, as we have studied it, cannot be cited as unequivocally supporting the infinitist belief" (p.413). The only thing that religious experience unequivocally testifies to is that "we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace" (p.413, James's emphasis). It is only various philosophical, theological, and, in particular, mystical schools of thought that immediately infer that God must be infinite, the all-inclusive soul of the world.

The practical needs and experiences of most religious individuals, James argues, are sufficiently met by a limited, qualified view of God or, in other words, a practical theism—a belief that beyond each of us and in a fashion continuous with us a larger power or self exists that is friendly to us and our ideals. On the basis of how we experience ourselves in the world and what we know about religious experience, all that is required for many of us is that God be viewed as greater than ourselves, not necessarily as infinite and certainly not as absolute. "All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary" (p.413).

But James goes even further and suggests that God might conceivably be only a larger and more godlike self, of which our present self would then be but a mutilated expression. In fact, the universe might conceivably be a collection of such larger selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it at all—in which case, James readily admits, we would have a sort of polytheism. He does not, on this occasion, defend this view, but only suggests that such a conclusion, such a "pluralistic hypothesis," is in keeping with the testimony of religious experience. In fact, most people, according to James, view God in this polytheistic sort of way. Those who believe in the absolute or require that God be viewed as infinite argue that unless there is one, all-inclusive God, our guarantee of security is left imperfect. Only in the infinite are all saved. And following this view, if there are different gods, each caring for a part, then some portion of us may not be covered with divine protection, and our religious consolation might fail to be complete. But this is precisely the claim that James is calling into question. His position is that the way we experience the world suggests that, indeed, portions of it may not be saved. Common sense has always been content with the notion of a partially saved world. At this point, he puts forth a variation on the position he took earlier in dealing with the reality of evil. Just as it may prove, James argues, that some instances of evil are simply gratuitous, that portions of the universe may irretrievably be lost, and that because of this the problem of evil calls for a practical, not a speculative solution, so likewise with God: it may prove that, for most of us, God is best viewed as that which is other than infinite.

In his lecture on the "sick soul," James deals briefly with implications that follow from acknowledging the reality of evil and suffering. In the course of this, he outlines his distinctive approach to the issue. To begin with, James observes that whenever theism is erected into a systematic philosophical position, not only is God inevitably seen

as the All-in-All, but the logic of the position requires its advocates to hold that evil, like everything else, has its foundation in God, with all the attendant problems of reconciling this requirement with the companion notion that God be viewed as absolutely good. For James, cast in these terms, the reality of evil becomes a speculative issue, one that seems to have no possible resolution. And since this irreconcilable dilemma came about in the first place because of the monistic assumptions upon which the position is founded, why not, James asks, cut loose from these presuppositions altogether and allow that the world has existed from its beginnings in pluralistic form, “as an aggregate or collection of higher and lower things and principles, rather than an absolutely unitary fact?” If one were to adopt this pluralistic point of view and still hold to the position that evil is real, he would necessarily face the possibility that some elements of the universe make no rational sense at all—that there are evils that are not instrumental to any higher goods, that cannot be rationally explained at all, and that must be treated as so “much irrelevance and accident—so much ‘dirt,’ as it were, and matter out of place.” This is what James means when he speaks of “gratuitous” evil and of having to face the fact that such realities can only be dealt with practically and not speculatively or theoretically. According to James, this is precisely what the ordinary religious person does: he confronts evil on a piecemeal, one-step-at-a-time, practical basis; and this is also why, for most of us, God need not be viewed as the All-in-All but merely as that which is larger and more powerful than ourselves and our circumstances, that which is large enough to trust for the next step (see pp. 112–14).

Aspects of James’s distinctive view of God are scattered throughout the entire range of his writings, and one would need to review all of them in order to get a full picture of his practical theism.¹⁷ In *Varieties*, in addition to establishing to his satisfaction that God is real, James’s view of God comes down to the following: When we speak of salvation, most of us seem to imply that this is a situation conditional upon the success with which each of us does our part—who knows whether our faithfulness to our own over-beliefs here below “may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?” Partial, conditional salvation is most familiar in the abstract. The difficulty comes in working out the details. The important point for James is that some seem willing to be among the unsaved remnant, if only they can be persuaded that their ideals and their cause will prevail, if only they have a chance of salvation.

We gain an added appreciation of how James came to these views on God by considering whether or not such a God can function as an appropriate object of religious worship. While James does not explicitly deal with this issue in these terms, his treatment of what he takes to be the distinctive characteristics of religious attitudes, plus his claim about the only conditions under which worshipful activities such as prayer can be said to be meaningful, contributes to the position he takes on the question of God.

The Religious Availability of James’s Practical Theism

At one point in *Varieties*, James anticipates what could be called a “religious” objection to his practical theism. He acknowledges that many ordinary people, as well as theologians and philosophers, assume God to be “one and only” and infinite, and he admits that “hardly anyone thinks it worth while to consider, and still less to uphold,” any other view of God (pp. 412–13).

H. P. Owen, for instance, summarizes the issue well in his study of ideas about deity: “Although the concept of a finite God can satisfy some it cannot satisfy other elements in religion. Thus while it permits us to regard God as Friend and Helper it has no room for the theistic (and in particular the Judeo-Christian) experience of him as a self-existent mystery on whom we are absolutely dependent and who merits our complete devotion.”¹⁸ And the British philosopher J. N. Findlay, in his celebrated attempt to disprove the existence of God, argues that reflection on the nature of religious attitudes leads “irresistibly” toward a view of God as that which is unsurpassable in every respect.¹⁹ Only a being that far exceeds human levels of power, wisdom, love, and other respected qualities

would be an appropriate object of the deference, awe, and devotion involved in religious worship. But Findlay goes even further. It would be “wholly anomalous to worship anything *limited* in any thinkable manner.” This is because all limited superiorities are “tainted with an obvious relativity, and can be dwarfed in thought by still mightier superiorities, in which process of being dwarfed they lose their claim upon our worshipful attitudes.” A worthy object of worship “can never be a thing that merely *happens* to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely *happen* to depend. . . . And not only must the existence of *other* things be unthinkable without him, but his own non-existence must be wholly unthinkable in any circumstances.” The only possible adequate object of worship, following this view, “should have an *unsurpassable* supremacy along all avenues; . . . it should tower *infinitely* above all other objects.”²⁰

According to these authorities, a qualified or limited view of God is ruled out as religiously unavailable. James’s idea of God, following this line of reasoning, may have certain theoretical strengths but is surely inadequate to the demands of religious worship. This conclusion rests, in large measure, on a particular understanding of attitudes of religious worship, and it is precisely on this issue that James takes exception to prevailing views. If, following James, we understand what is distinctive about religious attitudes differently, it ensues that a different view of God may well count as a worthy object of religious worship.

James and Findlay may agree that attitudes presume certain characteristics in their objects and that the presence or absence of these characteristics is a crucial determinant of the appropriateness of an attitude in any given instance. Still, their respective positions on God and religious attitudes could not be further apart. Comparing James and Findlay on these two subjects is worthwhile.

Findlay’s thinking on these matters is particularly clear. His rendition of what constitutes appropriate attitudes of religious worship is straightforward. He builds on this and, as we have pointed out, argues that only a being that exists necessarily is fit to be worshiped. However, since modern-day thinking rejects the idea of necessary existence as senseless or impossible, we are forced, according to this authority, to conclude that the only appropriate object of religious worship does not exist.²¹ For different reasons, as indicated below, James also objects to attributing necessary existence to God; but because he understands religious attitudes differently, it does not follow for him that God does not exist.

“We might say,” Findlay observes, “that a religious attitude was one in which we tended to abase ourselves before some object, to defer to it wholly, to devote ourselves to it with unquestioning enthusiasm, to bend the knee before it, whether literally or metaphorically.” Findlay takes this to be a “perfectly plain” and universally accepted idea of worship; what it emphasizes is the sense of awe and contrition the worshiper feels in the presence of that which towers over him. Such attitudes emphasize our sense of unworthiness in the presence of the “wholly other.” The same religious attitude that presumes overwhelming superiority in its object of worship also reduces us, “who feel the attitudes, to comparative nothingness.”²² In other words, for Findlay, what is most characteristic of religious attitudes are feelings and expressions of self-effacement.

James likewise describes religious attitudes in reference to the object of worship. All our attitudes, he says, are due to the “objects” of our consciousness—the things we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves (see p. 51). And while James and Findlay describe such attitudes in reference to our sense of dependence upon God, which manifests itself in the forms of sacrifice and self-surrender, once we learn how James is using such terms, the divergence of their positions becomes clear. For James, the central characteristic of religious attitudes is not one of self-effacement but rather a higher emotion or type of happiness, one that results from the relationship that we experience with the divine and one that reflects our newfound sense of self.

For James, even the simplest healthy-minded type of religious consciousness evidences this complex sacrificial attitude in which a higher happiness holds a lower happiness in check, while at the other extreme are those whose sacrificial attitudes take on “monstrously ascetic forms.” James grants that there are those sick souls who literally feed on the negative principle, on humiliation and privation, on thoughts of suffering and death. Their souls grow in happiness in proportion to the worsening of their outward state. But it is only at what James calls the “fanatical” end of the spectrum that we see instances of full-fledged self-abasement reflected in religious attitudes.

James acknowledges, along with Findlay, that what counts as religious attitudes has much to do with determining the kind of object that we worship. What he has learned from his study of religion and what Findlay seems not to appreciate is that the whole phenomenon is more complex than any single formula will allow or any single description will portray. There really is a *variety* of religious experiences, and the divine “can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champion of which in alternation different men will find worthy missions.” Each attitude, James says, is a

syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely. So a “god of battles” must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another. We must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems, and that parts are not interchangeable in the spiritual life. . . . If we are sick souls, we require a religion of deliverance; but why think so much of deliverance, if we are healthy-minded? (pp.384–85)

The important lesson James draws from this is needed as much today as it was in his day. Without question, some individuals seem to have broader experiences and higher vocations in the religious realm just as they do in the social world. What each of us must do is to stay within our own view of the world, whatever it may be, and tolerate others in their respective positions.

For James, a person’s religious attitudes may range from moods of sadness to moods of gladness, from experiences of fear to expressions of joy. Nevertheless, he thinks it is possible to isolate what is distinctive about religious attitudes. This he does by distinguishing the religious life from the moral life. Both religion and morality, as forms of life, are concerned with the manner of our acceptance of the world. After all is said and done, we are, in the end, absolutely dependent on the world and must perform some sort of acts of sacrifice and surrender to it. The moral response is reflected in attitudes of manliness, stoic resignation, and philosophical objectivity. Such a person, James says, can contemplate whatever ideal aspects of existence his philosophy is able to present to him and can practice whatever duties—such as patience, resignation, and trust—that his ethical system requires. Such a person lives on the loftiest, largest plane. He is a high-hearted freeman and no pining slave. The moral acceptance of the world requires that the individual hold his ground, that he exert himself in withstanding evil and opposition.

But, James reminds us, in the face of illness, when the prospect of death looms large, or when we are beset with morbid fears arising from a sense of powerlessness or the failure of our purposes, this attitude inevitably breaks down. On such occasions, what the person craves “is to be consoled in his very powerlessness, to feel that the spirit of the universe recognizes and secures him, all decaying and failing as he is” (p.45). And to have these cravings satisfied is an absolutely distinctive feature of the religious life. Where the moralistic stance relies on our efforts to exert ourselves, James says, the religious stance results from a higher kind of emotion in the presence of which we no longer feel as if we are on our own.

There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away. (p.46)

What we need to appreciate, James says, is that while morality requires us to exert ourselves and hold our own in order to achieve our goals, religion, at least for some of us, somehow enables us to obtain similar ends not by holding on but by letting go. For some, at the very moment when all seems lost, they find they have been saved from their desperate straits. They experience a higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required. Indeed, they experience a new life. They are reborn.

James does not know how this attitude is achieved; it is religion's secret. It is enough for him to conclude that because of this we can properly speak of religion as an infinitely passionate thing. Like love, wrath, hope, ambition, or jealousy, religion adds an enchantment to life, an enchantment that comes as a gift but is an absolute addition to the subject's life. It gives the recipient a new sphere of power; it redeems and vivifies his interior world when the outer world disowns him. "If religion is to mean anything definite," James concludes,

it seems to me that we ought to take it as meaning this added dimension of emotion, this enthusiastic temper of espousal, in regions where morality strictly so called can at best but bow its head and acquiesce. It ought to mean nothing short of this new reach of freedom for us, with the struggle over, the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes. (pp.46-47)

This happy state of mind is what we find only in religion. It is distinguished from other forms of happiness by the characteristic of solemnity. "A solemn state of mind is never crude or simple—it seems to contain a certain measure of its own opposite in solution. A solemn joy preserves a sort of bitter in its sweetness; a solemn sorrow is one to which we intimately consent" (p.47). James associates more commonplace expressions of happiness with the "reliefs" most of us feel when we experience life as a series of momentary respites, resulting from time and again being able to avoid confronting evil and suffering. But in its most distinctive embodiments, religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape (contrary to the teachings of Freud and others). The genuinely religious person does not escape from life but confronts evil and opposition outwardly, as a form of sacrifice, precisely because inwardly he knows them to be permanently overcome. For James, in those states of mind that fall short of religion, attitudes of self-surrender are submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and acts of sacrifice are undergone at the very best without complaint. But for the religious person, sacrifice and surrender are positively espoused, and even unnecessary sacrifices are made in order that happiness may increase. "*Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary*" (p.49, James's emphasis).

A major focus of James's interpretation of religious attitudes is the awareness individuals have of being intimately related to the divine; this awareness is expressed particularly in prayer, taken in the broadest sense to mean every kind of inward communion or conversation with the divine. "Prayer in this wide sense is the very soul and essence of religion" (p.365). The genuineness of religion is thus indissolubly bound up with the question of whether prayerful consciousness is or is not deceitful.

The conviction that something is genuinely transacted in this consciousness is the very core of living religion. As to what is transacted, great differences of opinion have prevailed. The unseen powers have been supposed, and are yet supposed, to do things which no enlightened man can nowadays believe in. It may well prove that the sphere of influence in prayer is subjective exclusively, and that what is immediately changed is only the mind of the praying person. But however our opinion of prayer's effects may come to be limited by criticism, *religion, in the vital sense in which these lectures study it, must stand or fall by the persuasion that effects of some sort genuinely do occur.* Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any other manner come about: energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective, of the world of facts. (p.367, emphasis added)

What are we to make of these two descriptions of religious attitudes? What implications follow from taking self-effacement as the central element in the complex of religious attitudes? Why Findlay emphasizes this feature seems clear enough: it follows from his insistence that the only possible object of religious worship is God viewed as a necessary being.²³ The trouble is, a literal rendering of the notion of complete self-abasement or total deference to God would result in there being no "self" to show devotion. Even a metaphorical rendering of the idea of being reduced to "comparative nothingness" suggests that selfhood is diminished; and, as David Mason puts it, "the notion of glorifying some object by abasing ourselves, while common enough, is not merely a kind of specious humility, but bad logic. It simply does not follow that we can add to another's value by detracting from our own."²⁴ What would it mean to suggest that God is gloried by my demeaning myself?

The real dilemma for Findlay is that he presumes it is meaningful to speak of ourselves as "nothing," to abase ourselves in reference to God, in the context of viewing God as a necessary being. By definition, such a God depends on nothing outside of himself: he has no needs, his existence and nature are unconditioned, and nothing we do can influence him. But if this is the case, what could it possibly mean to speak of self-effacement given that this notion, in turn, relies upon the presumption that what we do can influence God? When, on occasion, we speak of ourselves as "nothing before God," we could be acknowledging how far we have strayed from God as one who forgives and whose love is without limit. Speaking this way, to paraphrase Mason, need not be taken to mean that we literally view ourselves as worthless. Rather, it could be another way of saying that we realize that we have, in various ways, broken or violated our relationship with God, that we have endeavored to establish ourselves apart from God, knowing all the while that only by being in closer relationship with God are we enhanced. Using such language could be an awareness on our part, however dimly felt, that we can never stray completely from God and so can never totally obliterate our selfhood.²⁵

This alternative way of using the language of self-effacement rests on a view of God as a being with whom we can be intimately related, one to whom it makes sense to pray and whose forgiveness is worth seeking. On this view, basic religious attitudes need not require that the object of worship be in all ways necessary—quite the contrary: the attitudes that form the heart of religious worship emerge out of experiencing God as a being with whom we are genuinely related. And this requires that the object of worship be qualified or limited in some sense. This is James's position.

Furthermore, for James, the proper object of religious worship is not merely an ideal, but a reality, one that produces real effects in the world and is, in turn, affected by how we respond. "Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater task?" (p.408). All that religious experience unequivocally testifies to, according to James, is that we can, on occasion, experience a relationship or union with something larger than

ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace. All we need infer from this is that God be viewed as larger and other than our conscious selves—large enough to “trust for the next step,” large enough to make possible “a chance of salvation.”

However, following Findlay, if God towers “*infinitely* above all other objects” and if it is “wholly anomalous to worship anything *limited* in any thinkable manner,”²⁶ not only does it make no sense to speak of self-effacement, but we are forced to conclude that on this view there is “such an unbridgeable gap between the object and the worshiper that it is impossible for there to be a genuine relationship” between one who prays and the object of his prayers.²⁷ But if this is the case, then a whole range of concepts such as trust, love, gratitude, repentance, lial piety, and even fear becomes meaningless when spoken of in reference to God. Praise, petitions, thanksgivings, appeals for forgiveness—all such expressions are appropriately directed only toward a being who is neither completely ineffable nor completely transcendent to us.²⁸ Whatever the merits of Findlay’s criticism of the necessary existence of God, he does not seem to appreciate how his criticism of this concept bears on his portrayal of religious attitudes. Those who adopt Findlay’s position would appear to face two seemingly untenable alternatives: either disparage as idolaters all religious believers who worship anything less than a necessary being or dismiss those who do worship such a god as engaging in meaningless activity. In any event, it is hard to envision how Findlay’s view of deity and his corresponding view of self-effacement as the central element in the complex of religious attitudes can be said to be religiously available.²⁹

James, on the other hand, focuses instead on how the idea of God functions in the lives of common religious believers. On the basis of this, he defends the position that the real religious needs of such individuals, as evidenced by what they do in prayer and in other acts of worship and as reflected in the various attitudes they assume, are more than met by a belief that, beyond each of us and in a fashion continuous with us, there exists a larger power or self that is friendly to us and our ideals. On the basis of how we experience ourselves in the world and what we know about religious experience, all that is required—at least for many of us—is that God be viewed as greater than ourselves, not necessarily as infinite or as the absolute. “All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary” (p.413).

In his lecture on philosophy, James deals briefly with classical philosophical theism.³⁰ He lists some of the metaphysical characteristics traditionally attributed to God—not only his necessary existence but also his aseity (independent origination), immateriality, simplicity, indivisibility, and so on—and asks what possible difference these characteristics can make to a person’s religious life, whether or not they are true. These attributes, he says, are the result of a mere “shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary-adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs, something that might be worked out from the mere word ‘God’ by one of those logical machines of wood and brass.” Indeed, he dismisses talk of God in these terms as having “the trail of the serpent over them. . . . Instead of bread we have a stone; instead of a fish, a serpent” (p.352). What keeps religion going, James says, is something other than abstract definitions and systems of concatenated adjectives, something different from faculties of theology and their professors. “All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine, of which I have shown you so many instances, renewing themselves *in saecula saeculorum* in the lives of humble private men” (p. 352).

James is more open to the so-called “moral” attributes of God, but only because he interprets them in his own distinctive way. God’s holiness, he says, means that God can will only that which is good; his omnipotence means that he can secure the triumph of good over evil; his omniscience means that he can discern our true nature and

character; his justice means that he will punish us for what he sees; his love means that he will pardon us as well; and his immutability means that we can count on him securely. These attributes have value, James points out, precisely because they enter into our lives. Still, he questions the utility of talking about God in these terms for the following reason: What dogmatic theology represents is an attempt to transcend the sphere of individual feelings and direct experiences of the divine and to establish religion on the footing of impartial reason. Such efforts attempt to make religion universal by coercive reasoning and, in the process, to transform it from a private faith into a public certainty. They attempt to rescue its affirmations and private revelations from obscurity and mystery and make them transparent and public. But in James's viewpoint, this will never work, precisely because

What religion reports . . . always purports to be a fact of experience: the divine is actually present, religion says, and between it and ourselves relations of give and take are actual. If definite perceptions of fact like this cannot stand upon their own feet, surely abstract reasoning cannot give them the support they are in need of. Conceptual processes can class facts, define them, interpret them; but they do not produce them, nor can they reproduce their individuality. There is always a *plus*, a *thisness*, which feeling alone can answer for. Philosophy in this sphere is thus a secondary function, unable to warrant faith's veracity. I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless. (pp.358-59, emphasis added)

The book of Job laid out this whole issue ages ago, according to James. "An intellect perplexed and baffled, yet a trustful sense of presence—such is the situation of the man who is sincere with himself and with the facts, but who remains religious still" (p. 353).

To compare James and Findlay on the subject of religious worship reveals significant differences of opinion, even at the level of description. It also points out the fact that to hold, as Findlay does, that the essential characteristic of religious attitudes is an expression of self-effacement and to contend that this interpretation is universally acceptable is simply not the case. Among the possible interpretations of religious attitudes, many would not identify self-effacement as the essential element. Findlay's view on religious attitudes and God seems, by all accounts, far removed from the world of real religious concerns, while James's emphasis on a higher type of emotion and happiness—a revived and redirected sense of self, and the view of God that they imply—seems to be fully available. James, in other words, makes a strong case for the claim that his view of deity can indeed function as an appropriate object of religious worship in the lives of many individuals.

For James, a look at the religious life as it is really lived, and not as it is portrayed theoretically by theologians and philosophers, reveals that these kinds of experiences amount to an expression of hope, a different way of being in the world, one that relies upon a genuine chance of salvation. "No fact in human nature," James concludes, "is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance" (p.414). And no assessment of the human condition is more characteristic of James's position than this—the reality of a chance of salvation, which translates into a belief in the reality of God as that which is other than the absolute or infinite and "through which saving experiences come," is what makes the difference between a life in which the keynote is hope and one in which the keynote is resignation.

Summary Observations

Because James cast his net as wide as he did in assembling his examples of religious experiences from both Western and Eastern cultures; because of the imaginative selections he made of this material, coupled with the vivid descriptions he offered of these accounts; and because of the insightful theoretical claims he made about religion in general, God, and a host of other subjects, *Varieties* has proven to be a classic. As John E. Smith observes, many writers have come to the conclusion that "whatever views we may hold concerning religion or James's interpretation of the cases he cited, the sorts of experiences he described represent the essential facts to be dealt with."³¹

As I have summarized in this paper, James chose to focus on what he called the “religion of the sick soul”—those troubled and divided selves who long for deliverance and in many instances do achieve a rebirth. He coupled his empathetic portrayal of these individuals and their experiences with his conviction that there is an unseen reality, and he put forth his theory that those who achieve a second birth do so by identifying with their higher self—by becoming conscious that they are coterminous with an unseen presence, a “more” of the same quality with which they can get on board and save themselves when their lower self has gone to pieces in the wreck. One of James’s beliefs is that this “more” is God and that those of us who open ourselves to God’s influence fulfill our deepest destiny. James is willing to grant that God is real since he produces real effects. Each of us, and the world itself, takes a turn for the better or the worse, depending on whether we fulfill or evade God’s demands.

Other than this, James spoke about God in measured ways. The divine, he held, can mean no single thing; it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely. He was willing to suggest what God may be like but only on the testimony of religious experience. According to him, God need not be infinite; all that we can know with confidence is that we can realize a union with *something* larger and other than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace. God may even be a larger, godlike self, one of many. For most religious individuals, James thinks, all that is required is that God be viewed as friendly to us and our ideals, that we be persuaded that in God our cause will prevail, and that we have a chance of salvation.

Critics of views of deity such as James’s argue that such a God is not a fit object of religious worship. That depends on a number of things, not the least of which is what is meant by attitudes of religious worship. James came to his position on what is distinctive about religion by contrasting it with morality. For James, the central characteristic of religious attitudes is not self-abasement in the face of God; it is not to view ourselves as nothing. It is, in fact, just the opposite. What is distinctive about religious attitudes is a higher emotion, an exaltation, a kind of happiness that is the result of the intimate relationship we experience with God and our resultant newfound sense of self. For James, everything hangs on our being genuinely related to God; but for this to be possible, we need to speak of God in qualified terms, as other than infinite or absolute. James’s view of the attitudes of religious worship and his corresponding position on God seem, by most accounts, to be a real option for many religious individuals—one that enables them to be in the world in a different way, to live life in terms of hope and a chance for salvation.

Smith calls attention to two other factors that have contributed to the influence *Varieties* has had ever since it was first published. At the turn of the century, the climate of opinion in both philosophy and religious thought was dominated by various traditions of philosophical idealism, following the lead of Kant and Hegel. The emphasis was on religious *ideas* and *doctrines* and on the contention that religion could only be properly understood from within this perspective. Contrary to this reigning zeitgeist, James demonstrated that religion must first of all be understood in terms of the vivid experiences of individuals who are struggling with personal concerns and crises to which religious faith can and does provide an answer.

James succeeded in conveying the sense that, whereas much previous philosophy of religion was largely a dialectic of ideas, his account of the attitudes manifested in the experiences of the once- and twice-born, the sick soul, the divided self, conversion, and saintliness was a revelation of living religion in its pristine form. . . . Thus, James for some time to come established “religious experience,” both in name and substance, as the central focus for the philosophical interpretation of religion.³²

Not only this, but Smith reminds us that James had another objective in writing *Varieties*, one that makes the work of even greater worth: he wanted to establish the importance of religion in modern life. James was fully aware of and respected the aims of science. He also knew he was addressing an audience whose religious instincts were

being thwarted by scientific positivism as well as by religious orthodoxies.³³ What James refused to do was disconnect his understanding of religion from what he took to be the true intent of scientific inquiry. Both perspectives focus on facts; and for James, as we have shown, religion, properly understood, has facts of its own and makes a real difference in the world. Smith acknowledges this and correctly concludes that *Varieties* stands “as a necessary corrective to the fideistic tendency manifested in the religious thinking of recent decades, which has resulted in the encapsulation of religion within the walls of sheer faith, where it is divorced from any form of knowledge.”³⁴ James never accepted such a bifurcation.

The year 2002 is the centennial of the publication of *Varieties*. It has stood the test of time.

Appendix A

Approaches to William James

The first, and for many still the most influential, biography of James was written sixty-five years ago by his friend and colleague at Harvard, Ralph B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935). The first major biography of James after Perry’s was Gay Wilson Allen’s *William James: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1967). James’s most recent biographer is Linda Simon; see her *Genuine Reality: A Life of William James* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

A fruitful intellectual tension exists in Jamesian studies resulting from the fact that while many scholars come at his work primarily from the perspective of philosophy, usually focusing on his pragmatism, others approach him first and foremost from the vantage point of psychology. The best work on James from this latter perspective, in my opinion, is being done by Eugene Taylor. See his *William James on Exceptional Mental States: The 1896 Lowell Lectures* (New York: Scribner’s, 1982). See also his and Robert H. Wozniak’s *Pure Experience: The Response to William James* (Bristol, Eng.: Thoemmes, 1996). See also Taylor’s *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

In the 1960s, on another front, several scholars began to emphasize those insights in *Principles* that presaged phenomenology—stream of consciousness, pure experience, and radical empiricism—and advanced a significantly different interpretation of James. Having discovered James’s importance for Edmund Husserl and the emergence of phenomenology as a method of philosophical reflection, some initially located James within the phenomenological movement itself, calling him a “protophenomenologist.” The prevailing consensus is that James is best seen as having worked out his own distinctive phenomenology of consciousness and experience contemporaneously with the emergence of phenomenology. This insight into James’s thought has proven to be a real breakthrough in Jamesian studies.

Building on efforts to see James in this new light, Bruce Wilshire has written an important study of James’s whole philosophy. See his introductory essay to his *William James: The Essential Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984). According to Wilshire, many students of James have failed to appreciate that his thought represents a new vision of the philosophical enterprise, one which “overwhelms traditional distinctions and terms.” James advanced a view of the world that is much more comprehensive than most have realized and one that has a

center. “James undercuts and reverses the tradition of modern epistemology regnant in various forms since Descartes. . . . James repudiates all this. He claims this tradition rests on a blindness to everyday experience of the world as we actually live through it. The tradition plasters over this experience with distinctions that are not true.” Wilshire then summarizes the center of James’s vision, in terms of what it opposes, in the following way:

First, James claims that we do not, in the life we actually live, experience the world as mental: and what the experience is experienced as is what the experience is. Second, he claims that we do not experience discrete bits of things, but whole “fields” irreducible in their wholeness. Third, our most fundamental experience and knowledge of the world is not in the form of clear and distinct ideas, but rather of ones which are vague to various degrees. (That ideas can be important and true but vague is an extraordinary thought.) Fourth, knowledge of the world requires constant, active interpretation in terms of values or standards set within an ever-present and vague world-horizon, with temporality an essential dimension; thus that sensations are allegedly passively received is not a criterion of objectivity. Fifth and finally, there is no internal or strictly subjective realm inhabited by sensations, feelings, and values which is set over against a realm of brute fact ascertained by the dispassionate methods of mathematical physics; hence there is no fundamental gulf dividing science from ethics or thought from life. (Wilshire, *William James*, xviii–xix)

James’s alternative theory of knowledge requires that what can be said to be known must be built upon and do justice to prereflective, pretheoretical knowledge and experience. By this Wilshire means deliberate theorizing and knowledge by acquaintance. Furthermore, according to Wilshire, James’s center of vision includes his distinctive views of the “self” and of spirituality, autonomy, and freedom, which, in turn, become the basis upon which he develops his own ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of religion.

In another important work, *William James’s Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), Charlene H. Seigfried also builds upon a similar understanding of James’s center of vision and, in effect, reconstructs James’s reconstruction of philosophy. Other recent full-length studies of James include William Joseph Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); George P. Graham, *William James and the Affirmation of God* (New York: Lang, 1992); Ellen K. Suckiel, *Heaven’s Champion: William James’s Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality: A Jamesian Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

Appendix B

James’s Writings on God

James’s treatment of the subject of God, like his dealing with religion, is scattered throughout the entire range of his writings. A basic outline of his distinctive view of God is found initially in the introduction to the first book he ever published, an edited collection of his father’s writings, *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), included in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, number 11 in *The Works of William James*

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 3–63; next in the following six articles: “The Will to Believe,” “Is Life Worth Living?” “The Sentiment of Rationality,” “Reflex Action and Theism,” “The Dilemma of Determinism,” and “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” collected in *The Will to Believe*, first published in 1897, number 6 in *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); followed by what he says about God mainly in the postscript to *Varieties*; then in lectures I, III, and VIII, and appendix I, “Philosophical Concepts and Practical Results,” in *Pragmatism*; and finally in several of his Hibbert Lectures, especially I, III, IV, V, and VIII, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, first published in 1909, number 4 in *The Works of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

Notes

I am indebted to a number of colleagues who took the time to read and comment on earlier drafts of this paper. I want to thank, in particular, James E. Faulconer, Daniel C. Peterson, and Louis C. Midgley.

1. Beginning in 1975 the American Council of Learned Societies teamed up with Harvard University Press to produce a definitive, critical edition of James’s writings. Known as *The Works of William James*, the series is edited by Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. *The Principles of Psychology*, in three volumes, is number 8 in the series (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is number 13 (1985), and *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* is number 1 (1975). These are three of seventeen titles (nineteen volumes) in the series, the last of which was published in 1988. Such an ambitious effort is rare in scholarly publishing and reflects the importance and esteem accorded to James’s work in the fields of psychology and philosophy. In this paper, all references, as well as all page citations to James’s writings, will be to editions in this series.

2. In 1992 the University Press of Virginia began publishing a definitive collection of James’s letters. Nine volumes of a projected twelve-volume series entitled *The Correspondence of William James* have appeared to date. The first three volumes include the correspondence between William and his brother, the celebrated novelist Henry James, and cover the period 1861 to 1910. Volume 4 includes James’s correspondence beginning in 1856. Volume 9 includes letters up to 1901. The entire series is edited by Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley.

3. See appendix A, “Approaches to William James.”

4. John E. Smith illustrates this point in his introduction to the 1985 edition of *Varieties*, xiii.

5. I borrowed the term from James himself. In *Varieties*, in the lecture on the sick soul in the context of talking about the reality of evil, James says, “philosophic theism [by which he means the concept of the Absolute] has always shown a tendency to become pantheistic and monistic, and to consider the world as one unit of absolute fact; and this has been at variance with popular or *practical theism*, which latter has ever been more or less frankly pluralistic, not to say polytheistic, and shown itself perfectly well satisfied with a universe composed of many original principles, provided we be only allowed to believe that the divine principle remains supreme, and that the others are subordinate.” James, *Varieties*, 112, emphasis added. See appendix B, “James’s Writings on God.”

6. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 144.

7. James, *The Will to Believe*, 98.

8. Truman G. Madsen, “William James: Philosopher-Educator,” *BYU Studies* 4/1 (1961): 81–105.

9. In 1897 James was asked to give the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at Edinburgh University. Finally, in the summer of 1901 he delivered the first ten lectures and in the summer of 1902 gave the remaining ten lectures. His lectures in 1902 had been prepared in advance and the first edition of *Varieties* was published in England on the day he gave his final lecture, 9 June 1902. Between 1902 and 1985, when the definitive critical edition of *Varieties* was published, the original publisher and other publishers issued fifty-six impressions of the work (not counting foreign language translations).

Varieties contains much that comes from James's earlier studies in psychopathology. These were extensive and formed the basis of a set of Lowell Lectures he delivered in Boston in 1896, entitled "Exceptional Mental States." The title indicates James's position: he sees no sharp distinction between healthy- and morbid-minded individuals. Eugene Taylor has reconstructed these lectures and demonstrated that they provide a link between *The Principles of Psychology* and *Varieties*. Taylor shows that James *did not*, as has been widely assumed, turn from science toward religion and "mysticism" after 1890. While it is true that James became increasingly disenchanted with positivistic trends and the kind of scientific psychology being developed in America, one that "restricted itself more and more to the laboratory and to the filtering of reality through a clouded lens of statistical analysis," at the same time, rather than turn his back on the subject, he sought to broaden the discipline by including within it the study of psychic phenomena, the subconscious, and religious experience. According to Taylor, James "hoped less to make such explorations scientifically respectable than to use them as a means for transforming the ever-narrowing definition of science itself." Eugene Taylor, *William James on Exceptional Mental States: The 1896 Lowell Lectures* (New York: Scribner, 1982), 2.

10. James's approach in *Varieties* is a reflection of his general philosophical view of the world and portrays his ongoing attempt to better understand our mode of being in the world. It is based on his concept of pragmatism and on an incipient metaphysics he worked out earlier in *Principles* and subsequently called "radical empiricism." It reflects his conviction that our everyday experiences of the world as we actually live through them are fundamental and ultimately the basis for determining what is real, meaningful, and of value. Not surprisingly, James thought this was the way most of us assess the validity of our own religious experiences.

James's pragmatism, viewed outside the context of his notion of our experience of the world, will inevitably result in a distortion of what he means. His ideas of "thoughts verifying themselves" or being true because they "satisfy" some ends are invariably dismissed, on the basis of modern epistemology, as "subjective." For James, truth pertains to mind, but mind can only be understood in terms of its (our) prereflective, pretheoretical experiences of the world. This is the basis of James's rejection not only of traditional rationalism and empiricism, but also of his rejection of traditional realism and idealism—these traditions all understand "mind" as somehow independent of the experienced world, as a means or agency for knowing the world. But for James, "mind" always needs to be spoken of in terms of embodied beings—beings who are in the world and act upon the world. And as a consequence, the world is knowable only to the extent that it falls within our purposeful, ideal, and often spontaneous goals or aims.

The three key elements in James's radical empiricism are implicit in his pragmatism: (1) his postulate that all philosophical discussion of what is needs to be restricted to experientially derived terms, (2) his statement of fact that the relations between things are just as much matters of direct experience as are the things themselves, and (3) his generalization that experience exhibits its own continuous structure and there is therefore no need to postulate any transcendental connectives.

11. Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); see appendix A.

12. Amplifying this line of thought, James contends: “If we look on man’s whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism [his emphasis here is on reason and logic] can give an account is relatively superficial. It is the part that has the *prestige* undoubtedly, for it has the loquacity, it can challenge you for proofs, and chop logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same, if your dumb intuitions are opposed to its conclusions. If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. Your whole subconscious life, your impulses, your faiths, your needs, your divinations, have prepared the premises, of which your consciousness now feels the weight of the result; and something in you absolutely *knows* that that result must be truer than any logic-chopping rationalistic talk, however clever, that may contradict it. . . . The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together. . . . The immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow. If a person feels the presence of a living God . . . your critical arguments, be they never so superior, will vainly set themselves to change his faith.” James, *Varieties*, 66–67.

13. Initially, James planned to devote the second half of the Gifford Lectures to a philosophical interpretation of material he collected on religious experience. The first half was to be a phenomenological description of case material. But as he collected more and more documentation, he significantly revised his original plan for the lecture series: the amount of space devoted to his own philosophical conclusions was correspondingly limited to his concluding lecture and postscript. See the note by his son Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly, 1920), 2:169–70, and James, *Varieties*, preface, 5.

14. *Correspondence of William James*, 9:501–2, James’s emphasis. In another letter to a friend, Frances Morse, written 12 April 1900, James describes his objectives in writing the Gifford Lectures this way: “The problem I have set myself is a hard one: 1st to defend (against all the prejudices of my ‘class,’) ‘experience’ against ‘philosophy’ as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life—I mean prayer, guidance and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world’s meaning; and second, to make the hearer or reader believe what I myself invincibly do believe, that altho all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creed and theories) yet the life of it as a while is mankind’s most important function. A task well nigh impossible, I fear, and in which I shall fail; but to attempt it is *my* religious act.” *Ibid.*, 185–86, James’s emphasis.

15. See also *Principles*, in which James emphasizes that the sense of our own existence, of our own being in the world, is the ground of certainty for our beliefs, that “whatever things have intimate and continuous connection with my life are things of whose reality I cannot doubt.” James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2:926.

16. This oblique reference to the biblical view of God, on James’s part, is the subject of a recent article on James’s view of God by BYU philosopher David Paulsen. See his essay “The God of Abraham, Isaac and (William) James,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 13 (1999): 114–46. Paulsen argues that James’s limited or qualified view of deity has much more in common with one rather straightforward and plausible biblical view of God than with what he calls the “God of the philosophers.” Furthermore, Paulsen argues that James’s view of God anticipates a notion of deity that is emerging from contemporary trends of thought in certain evangelical Christian circles, positions

sometimes referred to as “free-will theism” or “the openness of God movement.” Paulsen has written extensively on the idea of divine embodiment, first in “Must God Be Incorporeal?” *Faith and Philosophy* 6/1 (January 1989): 76–87; then in “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83/2 (1990): 105–15; in “Reply to Kim Paffenroth’s Comment,” *Harvard Theological Review* 86/2 (1993): 235–39; and most recently, with Carl Griffin, in “Augustine and the Corporeality of God,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95/1 (2002): 97–118. See also Paulsen’s treatment of this subject in reference to Latter-day Saint views of God in “The Doctrine of Divine Embodiment: Restoration, Judeo-Christian, and Philosophical Perspectives,” *BYU Studies* 35/4 (1995–96): 7–94.

17. See appendix B. Several scholars have observed the importance of the subject of God in James’s writings; see, for instance, John E. Smith, *The Spirit of American Philosophy* (New York: Galaxy, 1963); Edward C. Moore, *William James* (New York: Washington Square, 1965); and Robert J. Roth, “The Religious Philosophy of William James,” *Thought* 41 (1966): 251. Still, as Roth notes, “the task of reconciling the scientific and religious currents of his time was something that preoccupied James throughout his scholarly life. Treatments of him have not sufficiently taken into account the fact that the problem of God is central to his thought.” I agree. There are at least three major reasons for this: First, James himself never systematically treated the subject. Second, many approach James’s thought about God from the perspective of modern philosophy—particularly that of his own work on pragmatism—and thereby often fail to fully understand what he means by certain key concepts in accordance with his distinctive psychological and metaphysical view of the world. And last, it seems obvious that James’s unorthodox, if not heretical, views on God contribute to a relative lack of attention to this aspect of his thought.

18. H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 59.

19. J. N. Findlay, “Can God’s Existence Be Disproved?” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 47–56.

20. *Ibid.*, 51–52, Findlay’s emphasis.

21. “Modern views make it self-evidently absurd (if they don’t make it ungrammatical) to speak of such a Being and attribute existence to him. It was indeed an ill day for Anselm when he hit upon his famous proof. For on that day he not only laid bare something that is of the essence of an adequate religious object, but also something that entails its necessary non-existence.” *Ibid.*, 55.

22. *Ibid.*, 49, 51.

23. James would readily classify Findlay as one who has a penchant for metaphysical speculation, for coming to conclusions in such matters strictly on the basis of a priori definitions and deductions.

24. In a detailed and helpful study of religious worship, David Mason deals with Findlay’s views on the subject, among those of others, and offers insightful criticism of his thinking on religious attitudes. I follow a number of Mason’s leads here. See David R. Mason, “An Examination of ‘Worship’ as a Key for Re-examining the God Problem,” *Journal of Religion* 55 (1975): 76–94, esp. 83.

25. See *ibid.*

26. Findlay, “Can God’s Existence Be Disproved?” 51, Findlay’s emphasis.

27. Mason, "An Examination of 'Worship,'" 83–84.

28. Mason follows Charles Hartshorne and others in arguing that rather than forming the idea of worship around the notion of self-effacement, a better option, one "more in accord with the most profound religious sensibilities; one which is also capable of sustaining a rigorous secular examination," would be to understand worship in terms of "the idea which lies at the base of biblical religion . . . the important religious and secular idea of love." But then, on the basis of this, Mason, like James, insists that we speak of God in qualified ways. According to Mason, properly conceived basic religious attitudes do not and cannot require that the object of worship be in all ways necessary. "The attitude which forms the heart of worship is love and this, as we have seen, requires that the beloved be, in some sense, contingent." *Ibid.*, 84, 88.

29. Mason is forced to conclude that Findlay's position on the religious attitude "is riddled with inconsistencies, is self-defeating, does not glorify God, and so is of very doubtful adequacy." *Ibid.*, 83.

30. It is important to point out that most of the time when James is dealing with classical theism, his focus is on the notion of the absolute as articulated by various forms of philosophical idealism. He was clearly a critic of this way of thinking—this sterile abstraction, he held, purports to explain everything but in fact changes nothing. *Varieties*, at least, offers little evidence that James was fully acquainted with the way God, viewed as absolute, functions in various established religious traditions. Nevertheless, not surprisingly, there are times when he reveals that he is sensitive to what some religious people may mean when they speak of God as absolute. This comes through, for instance, when James notes that, for many, God is the name for "whatever is most primal and enveloping and deeply true" and when he expresses the belief of most religious persons in the following way: "God's existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition, so that where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things." James, *Varieties*, 407.

31. Smith, introduction to *Varieties*, xi.

32. *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.

33. Carol Zaleski, in her helpful critique of James's efforts in *Varieties*, observes that it was "James who kept the door open when the reigning positivisms and skepticisms were slamming it shut in the face of those who sought a scientific blessing for their faith; it was James who kept the door open when the established orthodox traditions were, by dint of their own apologetic and imaginative failures, slamming it shut in the face of countless unchurched aspirants." See Carol Zaleski, "Speaking of William James to the Cultured among His Despisers," in *The Struggle for Life: A Companion to William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Donald Capps and Janet L. Jacobs (West Lafayette, Ind.: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1995), 59.

34. Smith, introduction to *Varieties*, li.