Psychology and Religious Experience:  
A Pathway to God?  
The Case of William James  
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Is there a war between psychology and the Catholic Church? Sometimes one would think so. One thinks, for example, of the disastrous encounters between Carl Rogers and the California nuns; but such outcomes should not be seen as necessarily representative of the total discipline of psychology. In the period beginning shortly before World War II, Catholic intellectuals have tried to integrate the developments of modern psychology and psychiatry into Catholic thought and practice. When Roland Dalbiez wrote his landmark study *Psychoanalytic Method and the Doctrine of Freud* in 1936, and, when Jacques Maritain published *Scholasticism and Politics* in 1938, they opened up new possibilities for Catholics in the behavioral sciences.

In those early attempts at reconciliation, however, psychology and psychiatry were seen as helpful techniques that could be incorporated into a Catholic and Thomistic framework. My thesis today is that psychology itself, at least in the thought of America’s greatest psychologist, William James, can be helpful to us as a pathway to God.

I

My choice of William James as the psychologist who can help us to affirm the existence of God may be surprising to many. Some recent authors, such as Bennett Ramsey, have presented James as holding a religion without a theistic and supernaturalistic framework. He believes that James' religion is immanentist and naturalistic. Daniel W. Bjork takes James' philosophy of pure experience as ultimately a return to a "big, blooming, buzzing confusion."

How can one explain these mistaken descriptions of James' thought? It seems clear that they result from a failure to grasp William James' "centre of vision." The task of interpretation of the work of a philosopher or a psychologist cannot be achieved merely by making accurate summaries of the individual arguments in his writings. One must place the writings in the

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context of the author's own life and with reference to his dialogues with other thinkers. This has been done recently, and it would require much more time even to summarize the results. The great American Catholic historian of modern philosophy, James Collins, has brought out very clearly the need for constructing a purposive unity of meanings in order to achieve an historical re-envisioning of a philosophy.

Henri Bergson expressed this same insight using the concept of "philosophical intuition." Bergson believed that, as one begins to penetrate more fully into a philosopher's thought, instead of just circling around it from the outside, the doctrine is transformed and simplified and finally brought together into a single insight. Bergson summed up this idea by saying, "a philosopher worthy of the name has never said more than a single thing: and, even then, it is something he has tried to say, rather than something actually said."

William James held a similar position, and this has to be taken into consideration in interpreting James' work. An unnamed woman had completed a doctoral dissertation on James' work. He criticized the author for taking utterances of his, written at different times, for different audiences, and stringing them together to form a philosophical system, which she then showed to be inwardly incoherent. He said that the work of "building up an author's meaning out of separate texts leads nowhere, unless you have first grasped his centre of vision by an act of imagination."

Finding this "centre of vision" is particularly important in the case of William James. James is such a quotable writer that one is often tempted to bring together brilliant remarks from disparate sources. As Julius Bixler commented: "The isolated reference from James is always unreliable." Several writers have attempted to identify the center of James' vision. Charlene Haddock Siegfried attempted to reconstruct the center of James' philosophic vision from his published and unpublished works. She acknowledged, however, that, since it was her reconstruction, "James as the authoritative controller of the true meaning of the text is de-centered . . . . At the same time I also try to reconstruct the reconstruction to overcome the limitations of the original text that arise from those unexamined assumptions which prevented him from working out some of its radical implications." Professor Siegfried then claims to demonstrate how James' uncritical but brilliant analysis of specifically human interactions in the world needs to be modified in the light of his own findings. In other words, William James did not have a "centre of vision" understood as a unique explanatory perspective from which he could see all his work as an intelligible whole.

Henry Samuel Levinson also attempted to formulate James' "centre of vision." After commenting that other James scholars had neglected to focus on the questions James asked in their attempts to reconstruct his "centre of vision," Levinson then did not begin with a question, but with a doctrinal position. He said, "I claim that the possibility of salvation, or what James calls
'the chance of salvation,' stands at the center of his vision."\textsuperscript{12}

Levinson holds that James is a religious thinker, that is, one who "asks esoteric questions and tries to determine their answers. But he has no such answers in store and, indeed, is open to the possibility that there simply are none to be found."\textsuperscript{13}

Another recent writer who has attempted to find William James' "centre of vision" is Paul Jerome Croce. Professor Croce situated William James in the late 19th century discussions over the possibility of certainty in science and religion. Croce's position is that James, while he recognized the difficulties of reaching certainty in science and religion, took a position between the relativists, who dismissed the possibility that there are any ultimate truths, and the absolutists, who say that we can not only know the truth, but that we can know infallibly when we have attained to knowing it. "In other words, he chose to cling to metaphysical certainty, but doubted the possibility of epistemological certainty."\textsuperscript{14} Croce's position is helpful, but, in his own philosophical armory, he does not have the concept of moral certitude, which can be utilized in the understanding of James' approach to God.

How then can James' "centre of vision" be expressed? The unique explanatory perspective, from which all of his work can be seen to form an intelligible whole, was expressed clearly in the conclusion of his talk to the Harvard Young Men's Christian Association:

> These, then, are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact. The "scientific proof" that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment (or some stage of being which that expression may serve to symbolize) is reached. But the faithful fighters of this hour, or the beings that then and there will represent them, may then turn to the faint-hearted, who here decline to go on, with words like those with which Henry IV greeted the tardy Crillon after a great victory had been gained: "Hang yourself, brave Crillon! We fought at Arques, and you were not there."\textsuperscript{15}

James' basic message is that life, with its hopes and ambitions, trials and struggles, cannot be ultimately meaningless. James spoke of "the nightingale of life's eternal meaning." This hope of eternal meaning, which was the central insight of William James' philosophy, implied for him personal immortality. "... Every memory and affection of (this) present life is to be preserved... He shall never \textit{in saecula saeculorum} cease to be able to say to himself: 'I am the same personal being who in old times upon the earth had those experiences.'\textsuperscript{16}

For William James then, God is not a mere wish, but a reality to which he committed himself, and theism is at the very heart of James' "centre of vision". Any interpretation of William James which sees him as an unbeliever, or which puts religion on the periphery of his vision, is not faithful to his life or thought.

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After establishing the unique explanatory perspective which enables us to make sense of all his writings, we are now in the position to follow him to a second step on our pathway to God. William James can help us grasp the reality of our freedom, a freedom to go in search of God, a freedom to go to God.

In the 1860s, William James entered into a deep period of depression. His father's eccentric theology and his chance contacts with churches were not strong enough to enable him to move on with his life. It was in this period of despair that James discovered the works of the French philosopher Charles Renouvier (1815-1903).

What attracted James to the work of Renouvier was Renouvier's rejection of psychological determinism. Earlier writers had held that science must assume an unalterable principle of determinism. James, following Renouvier, held for indetermination or freedom. When confronted with a decision where there is evidence on both sides, and one vacillates from one choice to the other, one may stop and doubt. Doubt itself is an active state. The very possibility of doubting, or suspending one's response before conflicting choices, is itself evidence of indetermination or freedom. As Renouvier said, "What raises a man to the dignity of an independent and autonomous being is the possibility of doubt." In certain circumstances one must make a choice, and doubt itself can be a free choice. Such a position means that freedom must be a choice. On the other hand, those who reject freedom also make a choice in choosing determinism. Freedom, then, is at the very heart of both philosophy and religion. This insight from James, the great introspective psychologist, can help us to choose freely to embark on the pathway to God.

In passing through the various disciplines at Harvard University, from teaching physiology, to teaching psychology, to teaching philosophy, James always tried to base his work on his personal experience. He never considered himself to be a metaphysician. In The Varieties of Religious Experience, he said of philosophical arguments for God's existence that "If you have a God already, whom you believe in, these arguments confirm you. If you are atheistic, they fail to set you right." Nevertheless, even if one does not share James' rejection of traditional philosophy, one can find room within Thomistic wisdom for another approach. For example, the late Canon Fernand Van Steenberghen, the great philosopher at the University of Louvain, included a chapter in his book Hidden God, on "the ways of religious experience." In that chapter he presented the proof, developed by Henri Bergson, which appeals to the evidence of the mystics.

Like his friend Henri Bergson, William James based his approach to God on experience, and, in particular, on the experience of the mystics. Unlike Bergson, however, James was a master of descriptive psychology. While
Bergson developed his proof without mentioning the name of a single mystic, William James founded his position on a vast collection of literary and other materials gathered from authentic mystics. James is still considered to be America's foremost descriptive psychologist, and his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), is still indisputably the great classic in the psychology of religion.

**IV**

The *Varieties* is the written text of James' Gifford Lectures on natural religion at the University of Edinburgh. They were delivered in the years 1901-1902, and published almost immediately after they were given. James' background was in psychology, and he approached religious experience as a psychologist. As a result, his subject matter was religious feelings and religious impulses and other subjective phenomena of religion. He did not study religious institutions. He focused on the original experiences of the great religious geniuses and religious leaders. It was they who experienced the most profound religious emotions and articulated them.

It is important to note that, in James' opinion, the spiritual value of religious experiences is not reduced when one can find a psychological origin for these experiences. For James, the final test of an experience is not its origin but the way in which it works.

In attempting to characterize the life of religion, William James sees it as based on the belief that there is an unseen order of reality. In the great religious geniuses, there is a sense of the reality of that unseen world, a feeling of objective presence, a perception that there is something there. James discovered how convincing these feelings of reality are. He says, "They are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experiences can be, and they are, as a rule, much more convincing than results established by mere logic ever are."

In *The Varieties*, James studied what he called "The religion of healthy-mindedness," or religious optimism. Nevertheless his interest turned more and more to the experience of "the sick soul." By this he means a view of life which is aware of the persistence of evil. James suggests, as examples of pessimism in religion, Goethe (1749-1832) and Luther (1483-1558). After citing examples of such "sick souls," James commented:

> How irrelevantly remote seem all our usual refined optimisms and intellectual and moral consolations in presence of a need of help like this! Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! Help!"

In Lecture VIII, on the divided self and the process of its unification, James describes the twice-born character. While some persons are born with an interior life which is harmonious and well balanced, the "twice born" have a discordancy in their temperament. "Their spirit wars with their flesh . . . ."
James describes Saint Augustine (354-430) as a classic example of a divided self. Another example is that of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). In the case of both Saint Augustine and Tolstoy, the unhappiness resulting from their inner turmoil forced them to search for some unifying principle which could bring order into their lives. Tolstoy began with the conviction that life was meaningless, but he later realized that this conviction took into account only this present life. He refused to commit suicide, and gradually came to realize that his holding on to life carried within itself, implicitly, the insight that life is not meaningless. Tolstoy arrived at faith in an infinite God, without whom there would be no life and no meaning.

William James' own religious experience of the evidence for evil and sin, and his experience as a divided self, played a significant role in his approach to God. His search for meaning in his life and his discovery of meaning are significant factors in the thought of James as a psychologist, and his experience is helpful to those who look to psychology for help in reaching God.

Up until now, in reporting William James' descriptions of religious experience, we have left aside the subject of mysticism. James said: "One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness. . . ." By "mystical states" James means experiences which are characterized by four marks. The first is ineffability. These experiences defy expression. No adequate report of the content can be given in words, it must be directly experienced.25

Secondly, mystical experiences have a noetic quality. "They are states of insight into a depth of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, all inarticulate though they remain, and, as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time."26

Two other qualities often mark mystical experiences. Transiency usually marks mystical states. "Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day."27

Passivity is another quality of mystical states. "The mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."28 After ranging through various religions of the world for examples of mystical consciousness, James turned to the Christian mystics. He describes the approach of Saint Ignatius Loyola in The Spiritual Exercises which "recommend the disciple to dispel sensation by a graduated series of efforts to imagine holy scenes."29 With this kind of mental discipline, an imagined figure of Christ would occupy the mind as a background to prayer. William James describes Saint John of the Cross as one of the best of mystical teachers. The Carmelite describes another kind of contemplation, a union of love, reached by "dark contemplation." This mystical knowledge of God is not clothed in the images and sensible representations which the mind ordinarily makes use of. Such a mystical knowledge of God can go beyond the
reach of the senses. "This is the peculiarity of the divine language. The more infused, intimate, spiritual, and supersensible it is, the more does it exceed the senses, both inner and outer, and impose silence upon them . . . ."^30

James brings out the cognitive aspects of mystical experience, their value in the way of revelation, by turning to Saint Teresa of Avila, whom he calls the "expert of experts". In describing such conditions. Saint Teresa describes the prayer of union, in which the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of herself. God suspends the natural action of all faculties of the soul. Nevertheless, "God establishes himself in the interior of this soul in such a way that when she returns to herself, it is wholly impossible for her to doubt that she has been in God and God has been in her. This truth remains so strongly impressed on her that, even though many years should pass without the condition returning, she can neither forget the favor she received nor doubt of its reality."^31

Some of the truths communicated in mystical ways relate to this present world, such as the reading of hearts and the sudden understanding of texts. Saint Ignatius Loyola confessed one day that a single hour of meditation had taught him more truths about heavenly things than all the doctors put together could have taught him.^32

In keeping with his philosophy of pragmatism, William James pursued his inquiries into mystical experience to explore their fruitfulness for life. After pointing out "the helplessness in the kitchen and schoolroom of poor Margaret Mary Alacoque,"^33 he related how the great Spanish mystics, especially Saint Ignatius Loyola and Saint Teresa of Avila, were persons of indomitable spirit and energy. For example: "Saint Ignatius was a mystic, but his mysticism made him assuredly one of the most powerfully, practical human engines, that ever lived."^34 Saint Teresa, says William James, is "one of the ablest women, in many respects, of whose life we have the record. She had a powerful intellect of the practical order. She wrote admirable descriptive psychology, possessed a will equal to any emergency, great talent for politics and business, a buoyant disposition, and a first-rate literary style."^35

What is the truth value of such mystical experiences? James holds that mystical states are rightfully authoritative for the individuals experiencing them. They have no authority, however, to compel others to accept these revelations uncritically. Nevertheless, they do have the power to break down the authority of non-mystical or rationalistic thinking. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth in which we may freely continue to have faith.^36

But what is truth? Doesn't James deny objective truth? Doesn't he call "true" what works? That criticism was made while James was still alive, and he responded to it by noting that truth means agreement with reality. He said: "My mind was so filled with the notion of objective reference that I never dreamed that my hearers would let go of it; and the very last accusation I expected was that in speaking of ideas and their satisfactions, I was denying

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The theme of this paper is that psychology, at least for William James, can be a pathway to God. After turning to William James and his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for descriptions of religious experience, we can now question James as to what conclusions may be drawn from such a study on the significance for life of religious experience. It is clear that James did not think of the results of his investigations as the basis for a logically compelling argument for the reality of God. Instead he framed what he called his "reconciling hypothesis."

The very use of the term "hypothesis" makes it plain that James does not consider his arguments logically coercive. He says plainly, "The most I can do is, accordingly, to offer something that may fit the facts so easily that your scientific logic will find no plausible pretext for vetoing your impulse to welcome it as true." In other words, he intends to form an interpretive hypothesis which will present the evidence as sufficient to generate moral certitude of the reality of God.

By moral certitude is meant the position that one can attain truth through practical reasoning. Unlike Kant, who did not consider what he called the postulates of practical reason to have any speculative value, James took a position somewhat like John Henry Newman. The originality of Newman and James comes from the fact that both hold that one can actually attain truth through practical reasoning. In taking such a position, both Newman and James were influenced by their early professional formation. Newman did his first scholarly work in the field of history. As an historian, he did not expect to reach mathematical or metaphysical certitude about the objects of his study. He did aim at learning the truth with historical, or moral, certitude.

In the case of William James, his early training as a physician seems subconsciously to have led him to have this same kind of confidence in reasoning which is not logically cogent. The physician must reach a decision as to the diagnosis of the illness before the treatment begins. He cannot delay too long in reaching the diagnosis, because the patient's condition may worsen. The clinician should seek the single most economical diagnosis that accounts for the available data. He may often desire greater clarity in making the diagnosis, but he still will be confident enough that he has learned the truth about his patient's condition in order to proceed with the therapy. In the language of the scholastic moral theologians, he has moral certitude; that is, he has no prudent fear of being in error in making the diagnosis. In still other language, while he cannot exclude all opposing possibilities, he reaches his diagnosis on the basis of converging probabilities.

When James assembles the evidence from the literature of religious experience, he holds that such experience may be seen as the subconscious
continuation of the conscious life. Nevertheless, he believes that the same evidence may be viewed from the "farther side." Some religious experiences, however deeply rooted in the subconscious, seem to come from some external source. One might stop there and conclude that the sense of union with a power beyond us is a merely subjective experience. There is another option, however, and the psychologist who is a religious believer may legitimately attribute the same religious experience to a spiritual reality distinct from the person experiencing it. For James, "The farther limits of our being plunge . . . into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely 'understandable' world."^41

In a passage reminiscent of Plato, James pointed out that we belong to the mystical region in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world. Our ideals belong in that unseen region, but the unseen region is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. Since it produces real effects, it must be a reality itself. There is no philosophic excuse for calling the mystical world unreal.\(^42\)

What should one call this supreme reality? James states without hesitation:

God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for the supreme reality. So I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God.\(^43\)

As William James developed his reconciling hypothesis in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, God is the supreme reality. He is able to have an influence on us and, in order to achieve our destiny, we have to open ourselves to his influence. God is personal, and he is able to make demands on us. We are called to be responsible to God's demands.

In his far reaching studies of the experiences of religious men and women, James found that they are unanimous in holding that they themselves and the whole universe of being rest secure in God's hands. In some mysterious way, the old ideals of truth and justice and love form a part of the order grounded in the existence of God.

Is this affirmation of God a merely subjective experience? On the contrary. For William James, it requires a real hypothesis. A scientifically respectable hypothesis must do more than merely describe the variety of religious experiences. To be successful, the reconciling hypothesis must fit in to a wider understanding of the world, and bring it together with a synthetic point of view, in order to make meaningful a person's absolute confidence and peace. In other words, for the person who accepts the reality of God, the world is changed. Different events can be expected in it, and different conduct must be required.

Sometimes one reads interpretations of James' pragmatic view of religion which completely misunderstand his position. It has to be emphasized that James did not just choose comforting doctrine as an alternative to skepticism. Instead, he made a thorough collection of the literature of religious experience.
With great logical skill, he formed his scientific hypothesis. This reconciling hypothesis was the great effort of his life. He clearly understood that the evidence did not allow for a purely logical argument which would be coercive. Rather, he carefully evaluated the converging probabilities disclosed by his investigations. With great moral courage, he followed the trajectory of the evidence to his acceptance of the reality of God, the over-belief on which he staked his own personal venture. In place of a logical conclusion to a dialectical argument, James committed himself to be faithful to his belief, and thereby true to himself.

This kind of moral certitude of the reality of God does not exclude every fear of error. James was a trained scientist, and he could vividly imagine the attitude of the scientist who thinks that scientific laws are all that count. Nevertheless, when he would do this, he would hear that inward monitor whisper “bosh”. One cannot allow sectarian scientists to exclude whole areas of truth. One must look to the total expression of human experience and view it objectively. This inevitably urges us beyond narrow “scientific” bounds.

**Conclusion**

Our Catholic tradition is very rich in intellectual resources. The world did not begin in 1962, with the opening of the Second Vatican Council. With any sense of history, we have to look back to Pope Leo XIII, who encouraged us to challenge the philosophical poverty of the Enlightenment by drawing upon the profound metaphysical insight of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Like the Israelites of the Old Testament who, when they listened to and followed their prophets, were blessed by God, so too the experience of the past one hundred years has shown how God has blessed the church when we followed the call of Leo, our prophetic Pope. When we have turned away from our own rich traditions, God has left us prey to error and dissent. It is not, then, from any rejection of our philosophical heritage that I set before you the approach to God of William James. It is rather that I wish to remind you that our Catholic philosophical thought, confident in its own traditions, can be hospitable to more recent developments, even in modern psychology, and that psychology can be, under certain conditions, for us a pathway to God.

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**Notes**


22. James, *Varieties*, p. 66.


32. James, *Varieties*, p. 325.
34. James, *Varieties*, p. 328.
44. James, *Varieties*, p. 408.
45. James, *Varieties*, p. 408.