Varieties of Religious Experience

William James

On this work
- A classic on religious experience
- Recommended even by atheists like Dawkins/Dennett
- Some definitions:
  - “over-belief” – belief beyond available evidence
  - “survival theory” – religion a left over from primitive times, destined to disappear eventually

The Topic: Religion
- Not institutional but personal experience
- Preliminary: feelings, acts, experiences of people in solitude in relation to whatever they consider the divine
- Does not require God (Buddhism, Emerson's transcendentalism atheistic)
The Divine: broad meaning, but not every total reaction to cosmos

- Middle p. 5 is view James rejects
- Voltaire’s "all is vanity" not religious
- Nietzsche and Schopenhauer’s grumbling not religious
- Must be: solemn, serious, and tender (bottom p. 6)
- The divine: "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. 7)

James: focus on most intense forms rather than borderline

- Not just grudging submission to moral law (Kant)
- Not humble submission to decline and death (Lampson, p. 7). Or Stoic Marcus Aurelius: comforted that "nothing will happen to me which is not conformable to the nature of the universe" (p. 7-8)
- Christian: joyful, peaceful acceptance; personal relation
  - "It adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else."
  - "This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion." A "solemn joy"

Reality of the Unseen

- General character of religion: "belief that there is an unseen order, and our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting" to it
- Power of ideas with no sensory image
  - For Kant, not properly knowledge
  - Yet powerful; we act as if
  - Absolute Beauty, Moral Law, Laws of Nature
Rationalism vs Mysticism

- Rationalism: “vague impressions of something indefinable” have no place
  - Need facts of sensation and definite inferences from them
  - James: the part of our mental life that rationalism accounts for is “relatively superficial”
  - “the unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument but a surface exhibition.”
  - James describing human experiences; not endorsing this view

Mystical Experience

- Ineffable: like rapture of music or love, cannot be conveyed to others in words
- Noetic: states of knowledge, “insights into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect”
- Transient (generally less than an hour)
- Passive: not felt to be under one’s control; prophetic speech, speaking in tongues, trance, automatic writing

From simple to more extreme

- Words take on new meaning: “I’ve heard that so many times but now it has more meaning”
- Effect of light on sea, odors, music
- Dreamy states, enlargement of perception
- Everything has a meaning, if I could only understand it
- Obliteration of ordinary sensation, intensity of “essential consciousness” or pure, absolute Self
- Pathology?
- Often from intoxicants: The drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness”
Limits of rational consciousness

- “James: (p. 25) “our normal waking [rational] consciousness is but one special type of consciousness.”
- “No account of the universe in its totality can be final which [disregards] other forms of consciousness.”
- James’ own experience: a reconciliation of opposites; “melted into UNITY.”

Examples of mystical states

- From solitude of individual consciousness to unity with “all that is”; “earth, heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-encircling harmony.” (von Meysenbug, p. 28)
- Unlike dreams, still seem most real afterward: “I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God.”
- Cosmic consciousness: life and order of the universe combined with elation and joyousness
- Universe not composed of dead matter but a living Presence; “…consciousness that I possessed eternal life…cosmic order is such that all things work together for the good of all”

Mystical Experience Characterized

- Mystical states have authority for those who have them
- No authority for those who don’t have the experience
  - The experiences are actually very diverse
  - They point to no specific belief
  - Forms not joyous but dreadful found in literature of delusional insanity (p. 32)
- Breakdown authority of rational consciousness as the only possible form
Conclusions: Characteristics of the Religious Life

- Visible world part of more spiritual world from which it gets its significance
- Union or harmony with spiritual world is our true end
- Communion (e.g., prayer) with that spiritual world (god, law, etc.) produces real effects within the phenomenal world

Psychological effects

- A new zest to life, like a gift
- An assurance of safety and peace and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections

How far are these beliefs TRUE?

- Science is materialistic; goes against religion
- “Survival theory”: religion an atavisim, relic of past ages, a chapter in history of human egocentrism
- From scientific/Darwinian view: “nature has no one...ultimate tendency.”
- Now-amusing selections from earlier writings (e.g., p. 46)
Is religion anachronistic?

- Easy “to treat religion as a mere survival” perpetuating primitive though
- P. 49: “Pure anachronism!”
- Lewis rejects this criticism “shallow” to ignore subjective world (p. 49)
- Rejects survival theory: the impersonal view of science may someday be seen as a “useful eccentricity” (p. 50)
- Religion, dealing with personal destinies, “must necessarily play an eternal part in human history.”

Two questions

- Is there a common nucleus among religions
- Is it true?

Common to all religions

- There is something wrong about us in our natural, usual state
- We are saved from this wrongness by making proper connection with higher powers (p. 54)
Is this TRUE?
- Certainly true psychologically, but anything “objective,” true beyond value to us
- The “more” that religious experience connects us to is our subconscious self
- There is more to our soul than we are aware of
- The “more” of religion is the subconscious continuation of our conscious life
- The sense of union with a power beyond us is a sense of something literally true (p. 57)

James’ own “over-belief”
- The divine presence is known through experience
- I will call this God (p. 60)
- An assurance of an ideal order that will be preserved
- Tragedy (e.g., scientific view of eventual destruction of solar system) only provisional and partial

Postscript
- James sides with supernaturalism over naturalism
- Sides with “crasser” supernaturalism (not transcendental idealism): god’s existence makes a difference to facts right now
- Prayerful communion “which in one sense in part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves” (p. 63)
- God produces immediate effects in the natural world
- Religious experience is union with something larger than ourselves in which we find greater peace