

The background of the book cover is a deep red, textured surface. It features a grid of arched openings, similar to a Roman aqueduct, arranged in two rows. Each arch contains a small, rectangular landscape painting. The paintings show various scenes: some with mountains, some with trees, and some with a body of water. The overall style is painterly and somewhat somber.

CHARLES TAYLOR

VARIETIES OF RELIGION TODAY

*William James
Revisited*

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VARIETIES
OF
RELIGION
TODAY



William James
Revisited

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

AND LONDON, ENGLAND

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Printed in the United States of America

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2003

Second printing, 2003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Taylor, Charles, 1931–

Varieties of religion today : William James revisited / Charles Taylor.

p. cm. — (Institute for Human Sciences Vienna lecture series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00760-3 (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-01253-4 (paper)

1. James, William, 1842–1910. Varieties of religious experience.

2. Experience (Religion) 3. Psychology, Religious. 4. Religion. I. Title.

II. Institute for Human Sciences Vienna lecture series.

BL53.J363 T39 2002

291.4' 2—dc21

2001039872

VARIETIES OF RELIGION TODAY

Institute for Human Sciences Vienna
Lecture Series

PREFACE

In the spring of 1999 I delivered a set of Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh. In them I attempted to come to grips with the question “What does it mean to call our age secular?” and to offer an account of how we got to be that way. I am still struggling with these issues.

As I prepared the lectures, it was obvious that William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* was an essential source. But it wasn’t until I began rereading it that I remembered, or perhaps noticed for the first time, that this too had been a series of Gifford Lectures, delivered in Edinburgh almost a century earlier. The sense I had of treading in the footsteps of this trail-blazing predecessor was enhanced by the powerful recurring impression, in passage after passage of James’s work, that (style and topical references aside) it could have been written yesterday, as against almost a hundred years ago.

This nearness says something both about James and about where we have come in our society and culture a turn of the century later. The idea gradually dawned

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of trying to articulate some of this, that is, of saying something of what I wanted to say about the place of religion in our secular age, in the form of a conversation/confrontation with James. The idea would be to disengage the way in which he captures something essential of our present predicament, while doing justice to the ways in which his take on religion could perhaps be considered too narrow and restrictive. This would have remained one of those intriguing thoughts that resonate semiarticulately in the back of one's mind, had not the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna invited me to give a series of lectures in the spring of 2000, marking the centenary of Hans Gadamer's birth.

So I made this Vienna series the occasion for working out my exchange with James, the result of which is this book. This exchange is idiosyncratic and selective. *Varieties* is an immensely rich and multifaceted book. James has tremendously interesting things to say about a host of issues, including the psychology of religious belief, conversion, saintliness, mysticism, and the unconscious, which I leave to one side. I am approaching his book with a very specific agenda, asking what it can tell us about the place of religion today. In

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my argument I also draw on some of the essays published in *The Will to Believe*. I hope the narrowness of the focus does not obscure the eerie sense that so many of his readers have felt, that this long-dead author is in striking ways a contemporary.

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1

JAMES:
VARIETIES

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It's almost a hundred years since William James delivered his celebrated Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹ I want in these pages to look again at this remarkable book, reflecting on what it has to say to us at the turn of a new century.

In fact it turns out to have a lot to say. It is astonishing how little dated it is. Some of the detail may be strange, but you easily think of examples in our world that fit the themes James is developing. You can even find yourself forgetting that these lectures were delivered a hundred years ago.

Which is not to say that there aren't questions one can raise about the way in which James conceives his subject. On the contrary; but this is not so much because of the difference between his time and ours; rather, these questions arise out of different ways of understanding religion that confronted each other then, and still do. To put it slightly more polemically: one could argue that James has certain blind spots in his view of religion. But these blind spots are wide-

spread in the modern world. They are just as operative in our age as in his.

I want first to discuss these limitations in James's concept of religious experience. Then I will try to engage what moved him in this whole domain, which is the issue of the "twice-born," the center of religious experience that you feel throbbing not only in the lives that James writes about, but also in his own life. Finally, I make a few reflections on religion today, in relation to James's discussion.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

People have pointed out the relative narrowness of the Jamesian perspective before. James sees religion primarily as something that individuals experience. He makes a distinction between living religious experience, which is that of the individual, and religious life, which is derivative because it is taken over from a community or church. For James, "your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country," has a religion that "has been made for him by others . . . It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search

rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can find only in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather. But such individuals are ‘geniuses’ in the religious line” (6).

We see here the Jamesian view of religious life, its origins and continuance: there are people who have an original, powerful religious experience, which then gets communicated through some kind of institution; it gets handed on to others, and they tend to live it in a kind of secondhand way. In the transmission, the force and intensity of the original tends to get lost, until all that remains is “dull habit.”

Later on, also toward the beginning of the book, James attempts to define religion as “the 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” (31). This is what is primary; it is out of religion in this sense that “theologies, philosophies and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.” So churches play at best a secondary role, in transmitting and communicating the original inspiration.

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I say “at best,” because their effect can also be highly negative, stifling and distorting personal faith. James is not enamored of churches:

The word “religion” as ordinarily used, is equivocal. A survey of history shows us that, as a rule, religious geniuses attract disciples, and produce groups of sympathizers. When these groups get strong enough to “organize” themselves, they become ecclesiastical institutions with corporate ambitions of their own. The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing; so that when we hear the word “religion” nowadays, we think inevitably of some “church” or other; and to some persons the word “church” suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are “down” on religion altogether. (334–335)

No wonder that “first-hand religious experience . . . has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation.” So that “when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its days of inwardness are over; the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. The new church . . . can be henceforth counted as a staunch ally in every attempt

to stifle the spontaneous religious spirit, and to stop all the later bubblings of the fountain from which in purer days it drew its own supply of inspiration" (337).

People who are against "religion," therefore, are often mistaken in their target. "The basenesses so commonly charged to religion's account are thus, almost all of them, not chargeable to religion proper, but rather to religion's wicked practical partner, the spirit of corporate dominion. And the bigotries are most of them in their turn chargeable to religion's wicked intellectual partner, the spirit of dogmatic dominion."

So the *real* locus of religion is in individual experience, and not in corporate life. That is one facet of the Jamesian thesis. But the other is that the real locus is in *experience*, that is, in feeling, as against the formulations by which people define, justify, rationalize their feelings (operations that are, of course, frequently undertaken by churches).

These two are clearly connected in James's mind. Feelings occur, he holds, in individuals; and in turn "individuality is founded in feeling" (501). The importance of feeling explains "why I have been so individualistic throughout these lectures." Now "compared with this world of living individualized feelings, the world of generalized objects which the intellect con-

templates is without solidity or life” (502). Part of what gives feelings their primacy is that they determine conduct. One’s feelings make a difference to one’s action, a crucial point to a “pragmatist.” But don’t ideas as well? James thinks they don’t, or not all to the same degree. Feelings generally determine conduct, without being inflected by the rationalizations. We can find a great variety of cases in which feeling and conduct are the same, while theories differ.

The theories which Religion generates, being thus variable, are secondary; and if you wish to grasp her essence, you must look to the feelings and the conduct as being the more constant elements. It is between these two elements that the short circuit exists on which she carries on her principal business, while the ideas and symbols and other institutions form loop-lines which may be perfections and improvements, and may even some day all be united into one harmonious system, but which are not to be regarded as organs with an indispensable function, necessary at all times for religion to go on. (504)

Now one can certainly criticize this take on religion. But before doing so, I should like to try to place it; that is, trace its origins and its place in our history and cul-