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## Introduction

Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they to be found? . . . We must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true.<sup>1</sup>

—William James, 1895

We cannot know when the sweeping forces of the unseen world will rewrite our convictions and forever alter the maps of our interior lives. I live today in an unanticipated future, in a world more sweetly magical, sublimely mystical, and intrinsically beautiful than I ever hoped to know. But the entry price into this new world was the dissolution of an older one, and, one by one, I watched the structures that supported my previous life crumble and fall away, dissolving forever into a past I find increasingly difficult to recall. My own past has become something like the oft-told story of another's dream, familiar but somehow not really known. . . .

These words are as true now as they were when I wrote them, in the aftermath of a profound conversion experience, over ten years ago. My unanticipated future has unfurled, a future that continues to emerge through the dissolution of older structures, on the foundations of dreams no longer as pressing as I once thought they were. Such is the price of all growth, for as Erik Erikson observed, "It must be remembered that all 'gradations' in human development mean the abandonment of a familiar position, and that all growth . . . must come to terms with this fact."<sup>2</sup>

Does the construction of a Christian soul, like the Roman church of Maria sopra Minerva, always involve a process of reconstruction over existing structures? And if so, how well have we, collectively and individually, come

to terms with that fact? What forms do such reconstructions take? How well do we support one another's developing vocations, one another's growth toward a deeper relationship with God? Do we recognize the twice-born nature of vocations founded on the dissolution of previous lives? Or do we assume steady, systematic constructions on a level plane? How do our religious communities and institutions reflect our own experiential assumptions about the nature of growth in the spiritual life?

Questions such as these have long been posed. One factor alone has remained constant throughout the spent decade since my own conversion. Since the moment I awoke to my transformative experience, I knew with certainty that I would spend the rest of my life seeking to understand my completely undeserved season in grace, exploring the poignant power and beauty that can only be found in illuminative religious experience. Today I continue that search for understanding, with numerous structures in place that both challenge and support such a quest. In the immediate aftermath of my heartfelt encounter with the Divine, there were few guideposts, few markers on a very unfamiliar path. In that new land, the voices from the "old country" of my previous experiential world arrived like dry, disembodied letters. Written to a suddenly distant emigrant, well-meaning assumptions were kindly relayed by those who remained behind, those who knew so little of that emigrant's radically altered daily reality. I was lost, lost until, that is, I came to the singular voice of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1897, William James confessed that "religion is the great interest of my life."<sup>4</sup> A year later he was invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. He spent the next few years gathering the information he would present in those lectures, accounts and perspectives published in 1902 as *The Varieties*. Like the listeners to the Gifford Lectures in the English and Humanities classroom at the University of Edinburgh, I began the integration of my own transformation in the classroom of William James's *Varieties*.

William James's classroom has proven a remarkable place to be. James remains one of the most extraordinary voices to emerge from American thought at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. But James is a complex figure, not one easily understood or one who fits easily into disciplinary perspectives. Linda Simon, in the James entry in the *Literary Encyclopedia*, lists him as a "philosopher, teacher, physician, psychologist, lecturer, essayist, scholar, religious writer."<sup>5</sup> He was all of these, and more. The very diversity of his abilities sometimes obscures a full portrait of James's complexity as a thinker. James would be untroubled by the inability of subsequent scholars to pigeonhole him. His own conviction was that every human perspective is only partial, that our physical presence in the world provides both the foundation for and limitations of the way in which we interact with that world.

## BEGINNING WHERE WE END

If James marked the beginning of the long, slow process of integration that followed my own powerful religious experience, I was in no way prepared to find that years of study and research would lead me back to him. That was one of the surprises that took more than a decade to develop. Develop it did, and in writing this book I have, in a sense, come full circle, back to the unique voice of William James, who first served as my guide to a transformed world. The circuitous path that began and ended with James is of some interest, and demonstrates in many ways how contemporary James's thought is. Writing at the close of the nineteenth century, James's thought is more in keeping with thought at the beginning of the twenty-first century than with many dominant trains of thought of the century in between.

I first turned to James more than a decade ago, in the aftermath of the profound experience that so intrigued and enthralled me. In the long process of integrating that experience, I picked up a copy of William James's *Varieties*. The quest began simply enough. As humans we all seek community, seek to share our experience. And I set out to find those who had shared some elements of my own encounter with the Divine. Naively, I thought my experience was fairly common, and it would only be a matter of time before I encountered like-minded souls.

It wasn't that simple. Ours is a culture that deeply mistrusts any kind of pronounced religious experience, while at the same time remains fascinated by it. American ambivalence toward religious experience has been around for a long time. On one hand, we collectively endorse an assumptive world of positivistic rationalism—embracing a clean, clear world governed by science and technology. We assume we can all communicate with one another through some form of reasonable objective exchange. On the other hand, America has always been more interested in the experiential than the abstract. From the earliest days in the New World, our daily reality has been too far removed from that of our forebears, from the cultural and political norms that provided safe, predictable structures for life in the Old World. Collectively, we distrust intellectualism. We chafe against the dogmatic, and our penchant for the authority of firsthand experience has carried over to our religion.

This is the America that gave birth to not one but multiple Great Awakenings. This is the country that legally protects the most diverse forms of worship and parades new religious practices the way other nations follow fashion. This is the country that has nurtured the growth of the Holiness movement, Pentecostalism, and the Charismatic movement. This is also the nation that has embraced New Thought, New Age, astrology, and tarot, where yoga studios stand next to Episcopal churches, and Catholic cathedrals lie catty-cornered from Buddhist temples.

Through that mosaic religious landscape I wandered, looking for voices that carried some kind of resonance, who could provide an echo of my own experience in some way. I found those echoes in the accounts James examined in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. These are the extremes in religious experience, accounts that James terms "religious genius." But James is neither exactly flowery nor complementary in his portrayal of these sporadic outbursts, this particular and somewhat peculiar talent. In fact, he would seem to relegate his subject to a special kind of "crankiness." He is particularly intrigued when religious intensity is combined with significant intelligence or intellect. Speaking in the exclusively male language of his age, James tells us:

Borderland insanity, crankiness, insane temperament, loss of mental balance, psychopathic degeneration (to use a few of the many synonyms by which it has been called), has certain peculiarities and liabilities which, when combined with a superior quality of intellect in an individual, make it more probable that he will make his mark and affect his age, than if his temperament were less neurotic. There is of course no special affinity between crankiness as such and superior intellect, for most psychopaths have feeble intellects, and superior intellects more commonly have normal nervous systems. But the psychopathic temperament, whatever be the intellect with which it finds itself impaired, often brings with it ardor and excitability of character.<sup>6</sup>

Being of a singular nature, I was happy to take my place alongside James's psychopaths, cranks, and neurotics. Friends of long standing can certainly vouch for my suitability. But truth be told, James's use of the term *psychopath* cannot be considered identical to the meaning commonly ascribed to the term today. James identifies it more as a "neurotic constitution."<sup>7</sup> And it is this neurotic constitution, he tells his readers, that is "destined to play a part in much that follows."<sup>8</sup> Indeed it shall, in this volume also, as will be seen in later chapters.

What James did was lead me to an ongoing study of religious founders and reformers, to those creative individuals who might be better termed "religious innovators," aspirations of genius aside. Most important for my own journey, he led me to the mystics and to the mystical tradition. Martha Beck, in the aftermath of her own profound religious encounter, tell us "in the months and years after this experience I would practice every form of religious and mystical discipline I thought might have the slightest chance of bringing me back into the presence of that overwhelming love."<sup>9</sup> In a similarly driven frenzy, I searched for echoes in the writing of every major mystic I could locate, digging through autobiographies and treatises, through ancient letters and spiritual essays, ever searching for that resonance with my own experience, that assurance that I was not alone.

Along the way I found that many of these spiritual innovators had things in common beside the profound nature of their encounters with the Divine.

For one, they were all subject to "trials" and "afflictions." In today's parlance, there was an extremely high rate of traumatic experience in the lives of these mystics and reformers. My explorations, taking place in the early to mid-nineties, paralleled the rise of new information about the human response to trauma. It also paralleled the constellation of the field of traumatic studies, an interdisciplinary field that emphasized a psycho-social-biological approach to studying the response to trauma.

Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk notes that work in the field of traumatic studies has only recently emerged. "Until recently neither the psychodynamic nor the biological orientations have paid much attention to the impact of overwhelming life experiences on both the soma and the psyche."<sup>10</sup> One of the most significant reasons why trauma has not been addressed earlier has to do with the internal orientation of the most influential schools of psychology, such as Freudian analysis. "Mainstream psychiatry has usually studied individuals as self-contained entities, relatively divorced from the social contexts within which they mature and thrive," van der Kolk explains. "A human being is a biological organism embedded in a social environment from the moment of birth."<sup>11</sup> Given van der Kolk's emphasis on social environment, echoing the increasing sociodynamic emphasis of traumatic studies, knowledge of the social environment in which the survivor of traumatic experience lives becomes far more significant than in others schools of psychological thought or analysis.

This recontextualization of experience, commonly employed in traumatic studies, led me to begin recontextualizing the role of trauma in the lives of spiritual innovators. Curious patterns emerged, which directed my course of study in early graduate work in Berkeley and which will also resurface in chapter 7.<sup>12</sup> But the type of posttraumatic spirituality that I studied was far from universal. In fact, there is a wide range of human response to trauma. Some of those who suffer profound traumas emerge relatively unscathed. Traumatic studies had no explanation for these apparent "exceptions." Researchers began to develop a parallel field of study, the study of resiliency, the characteristics that seem to make some individuals resilient in the face of overwhelming experience or adverse life circumstance.

My journey back to James moved forward significantly when I discovered the work of Jerome Kagan and his studies on temperament. After hearing Kagan present his research to a group of physicians and researchers at Emory University, I queried him on whether he thought temperament was related to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder. Kagan was certain that temperament was a factor. His confidence intrigued me and I added studies of temperament, "moderately stable, differentiating emotional or behavioral quality whose appearance in childhood is influenced by an inherited biology," to the intellectual tools I brought to bear on the question of religious experience.<sup>13</sup>

The final curve in my road back to James came when I helped John Snarey teach his course on the psychology of religion. Snarey is a noted authority on James, and the course was based on a close reading of James's *Varieties*. Through *The Varieties*, James, as Snarey wrote in the syllabus, "teaches us how to think more clearly about the dynamics, functions, and integrity of personal religious encounters." The course also placed James's work in conversation with recent scientific studies of religion. Preparing for and teaching the course gave me the opportunity for close study of James's definitive phenomenological studies of conversion and allowed me to place them in conversation with contemporary studies on the biology of religious experience and alongside current studies from the psychology of religion. The genesis of this book emerged in the process.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is widely regarded as the greatest classic in the psychological study of religion. James's *Varieties* is not just a philosophy of religion. Nor is it a history. Instead, James positions himself as a psychologist for whom religious propensities "must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution," a psychologist undertaking a "descriptive survey of those religious propensities."<sup>14</sup> James explains that the subject for such a survey must be "religious feelings and religious impulses" and that he will limit himself to the "developed subjective phenomena," the articulate expression of "fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography."<sup>15</sup>

In that framework, James undertook what today we recognize as a phenomenological description of religious experience, one in which each of us finds something we can recognize, in which some resonance with our own experience rings in the authenticity and breadth of James's scholarship and vision. James directs our attention to those "who were most accomplished in the religious life and best able to give an intelligible account of their ideas and motives."<sup>16</sup> These, he assures us, we shall find "along the beaten highway."<sup>17</sup> His familiar sources will be "books that most of you at some time will have already had in your hands."<sup>18</sup>

But James's work was informed by other sources as well. It was constructed on the physiological perspective that grew out of his medical training and informed by his defining work in the field of psychology and by an education that spanned disciplines, continents, religions, and denominational divisions. James's background was inherently interdisciplinary. His own perspective was one that could not be achieved by any form of study more narrowly conceived. He focuses our attention consistently on plurality.

The varieties of religious experience will represent a plurality of experience, and James will be very careful not to universalize any one perspective but rather to constantly unsettle any comfortably situated reader by emphasizing the plurality inherent in the rich varieties of religious experience.

Today, a century after James first published the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, increasing evidence from studies of temperament, neurocognitive and neurohormonal studies, and traumatic studies indicates individuals do have biological differences that affect perception and reactivity. Different individuals evidence different levels of baseline arousal, sensitivity of the sympathetic nervous system, and emotional responsiveness to change. Since the physiological systems affected by these differences are many of the same systems associated with the biology of religious experience, contemporary research suggests—as James told us a century ago—that there may be relatively stable, categorizable differences in religious experience paralleling the differences increasingly noted in these studies.

Yet the majority of our religious institutions continue to operate on the assumption of a single universal normative model for religious experience, often universalizing elements of the personality or charism of the particular founder or reformer associated with the institution. There is increasing evidence of the need for greater plurality in terms of liturgical, institutional, and educational response to religious experience. Contrary to universal psychological or theological applications, we need a more varied range of religious offerings in recognition of documented varieties in religious temperament and development.

Currently, many mainstream religious congregations are experiencing significant shifts in religious attendance and participation. Numerous congregations face a "graying" population, as participation among younger members declines. Mainstream congregations lose members to dynamic evangelical communities, to secular-based philosophies, and to New Age thought. In decades past, when American culture was more uniformly Christian, when religious institutions carried greater social authority, mainstream congregations could afford to disregard differences in religious experience in order to focus on a single normative, universal portrayal of such experience. Strong congregational and parish attendance meant churches could withstand the loss of those members whose personal religious experience differed from the majority or the prevailing norm for that institution. Many members were likely to remain affiliated for other reasons, including social or family considerations.

Today, when many practicing Christians engage in a form of spiritual serial monogamy and others pride themselves on eclectic mixes, members are far more likely to leave a particular congregation in search of a better fit. Mainstream denominations need to reevaluate whether they can afford to lose those church members, and whether they ignore differences in religious

experience at their peril. Congregational leadership needs to be able to make those decisions in light of the gifts associated with differing types, for the loss or estrangement of the believer represents the loss of all the gifts that believer brings to the community as well.

### EXAMINING JAMES'S METHOD

The explorations described in this book use a phenomenological method of inquiry that extends the work of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This method can be characterized as experiential, focusing on extremes in experience and reflecting criteria based in pluralism, probabalism, and teleological outcomes, or as James would say, a focus on the fruits. But certain distinctions must be made between what many readers think of as phenomenology and the type undertaken in the pages that follow.

Many readers in diverse disciplines fail to grasp the essentials of William James's method. One of the charges often leveled against William James is a lack of consistency in terms of his thought or the areas in which he focused his own attention. Some critics, for example, suggest that there is little religion in *The Principles* and that there is little of the psychology of *The Principles* in *The Varieties*. Such critique suggests a selective lens in use, for those who know James's work well see remarkable consistency in his writings throughout his lifetime. If such charges were true, they would suggest a significant problem in basing a methodological approach on the work of William James.

James M. Edie asserts that *The Principles of Psychology* are, in fact, the prototype for the rest of James's work and the first place you find his most "fundamental and original" ideas. *The Principles*, Edie reminds us, may well be James's first published work, but it is certainly not an "immature" one, and it would be misleading or naive to equate the two.<sup>19</sup> James spent more than a decade working on the manuscript of *The Principles* and did not publish it until he was forty-nine, when he already had years of teaching and decades of writing under his belt. In a perspective informed by Edie, all of James's subsequent work, including, or even especially *The Varieties* (which is of greatest interest for our purposes), can be seen as the development of ideas proposed in *The Principles*. The very words selected for chapter titles of *The Principles* list ideas that intrigued James throughout his life—sensation, habit, stream of consciousness, the self, attention, perception, emotion, and will.<sup>20</sup>

One might even assert that *The Principles* served as a kind of school of phenomenological method for James's later work in *The Varieties*. As Edie notes, James himself would most likely have rejected the title of "phenomenologist." In his day the term was associated with Hegel.<sup>21</sup> But James's method is phenomenological. Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenol-

ogy for us. Phenomenology is "an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide."<sup>22</sup> James's investigation in *The Varieties* is a focus on the religious as lived experience—a "direct description"—and James is very careful to separate facts regarding the existence of religious experience from the value ascribed to it.<sup>23</sup> As W. Jones notes, James was "one of the first philosophers to adopt what subsequently came to be called the 'phenomenological' approach, that is, an approach that seeks to start from, and confine itself to, a presuppositionless description of experience as it comes."<sup>24</sup>

Edie's analysis of James emphasizes that James, particularly in *The Principles*, also had a critical influence on the thought of Edmund Husserl. Husserl taught or influenced many of those whose names have dominated philosophical thought in the twentieth century, including such notables as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Edith Stein. Today scholars recognize that James's work had a much greater influence on Husserl than a previous generation of scholars acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> Like Husserl, James advocated a return to experience, focusing on the human as an experiencing being. According to Edie, in a nice turn of phrase, they both replace metaphysics with "philosophical anthropology."<sup>26</sup> In that philosophical anthropology we must turn to experience as a primary methodological construct. Thus the method in my explorations, following James, will focus on the experiential.

### Experience

When an individual thinks of the "phenomenology of religion," he or she is likely to associate the term with such scholars as Mircea Eliade or Rudolph Otto. As Edie points out, this school developed out of late nineteenth-century *Verstehende psychologie* and utilizes a classificatory scheme that "has developed a comprehensive (*Verstehende*) hermeneutics of religious symbols, institutions and the like, and has established a more or less universal sociological and anthropological 'morphology' (Eliade) or 'typology' (Wach) for the interpretation of historical religions."<sup>27</sup> These approaches emphasize the eidetic aspect of phenomenological observation—that which can be observed by the eye. There is almost a tendency to conflate phenomenology with ethnography. But Edie makes an important observation, one worth quoting at length:

There is another phenomenological approach possible in this area, one which appears to be much closer to what Husserl and Merleau-Ponty envisaged as the properly phenomenological elucidation of this domain of experience. It would

be a phenomenology precisely not of *religion*—in some or all of its manifestations—but of *religious experience as such*. It would be a study not of historical and philological origins of religious meanings and symbols, but of the foundations of such meanings in consciousness itself. The *Ursprung* of such meanings would not be found through historical, sociological and anthropological investigations but through an analysis of actual present religious experience. It would be, in short, less a hermeneutics of texts and institutions than a turn to naïve, unreflective experience, as we find it prior to any theory or doctrine about it.

This is the orientation of William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and this is what radically distinguishes him from other phenomenologists of religion.<sup>28</sup>

Edie suggests that James was the first to undertake a phenomenology of religion in an “experiential sense.” He has had few successors, and it is long since time that such a project was undertaken.

James has been consistently criticized for this focus on the individualistic and immediate experiential aspects of religious experience. In fact, he takes some care to defend the limits of the areas he will explore in *The Varieties*. “In critically judging of the value of religious phenomena, it is very important to insist on the distinction between religion as an individual personal function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product . . . in this course of lectures ecclesiastical institutions hardly concern us at all. The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast,” he reminds us. “First-hand individual experiences of this kind has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation to those who witnessed its birth. Naked comes it into the world and lonely; and it has always, for a time at least, driven him who had it into the wilderness, often into the literal wilderness out of doors.”<sup>29</sup>

Charles Taylor sees this focus of James as consistent with a larger rejection of intellectualism in religion, along with that of the Pietists and John Wesley, which emphasizes emotion and expression over doctrine and theological scholarship.<sup>30</sup> And indeed, the shift of theology in the second half of the twentieth century away from private devotionism and toward socially informed public theologies or liberation theologies has consistently made clear some of the limitations of James’s approach.<sup>31</sup>

James himself admits that the personal, emotional experience of the individual is quickly communicated to others and can often become the basis for a communal reaction or movement.<sup>32</sup> Endless debate can, and does, ensue about the origins of religion—between individual and community, between inherited tradition and immediate experience, between communal foundations of language and individualistic expression of ecstasy. But for the purposes of my exploration I’ve chosen to follow, rather than challenge, James’s perspective. I do so without assuming that his is the only valid perspective for the study of religion and religious experience.

Another good cautionary note comes from Paul Tillich in his discussion of participation and collectivism. James’s *Varieties* is a typology, the limitations of which should be balanced against the information available from a larger field of theological and religious studies. As Tillich reminds us, “a typological description presupposes by its very nature that the type is rarely fully actualized. There are degrees of approximation, mixtures, transitions, and deviations.”<sup>33</sup> I am exploring degrees of approximation and not relegating individuals irrevocably into the prison of a specific type.

Another important methodological approach employed by James is the examination of extremes in religious experience—the ends of a continuum, so to speak. James justifies this approach in the *Varieties*, writing, “When we compare these intenser experiences with the experiences of tamer minds, so cool and reasonable that we are tempted to call them philosophical rather than religious, we find a character that is perfectly distinct. That character, it seems to me, should be regarded as the practically important *differentia* of religion for our purpose.”<sup>34</sup>

Once these extreme characters have been identified, put in high relief so to speak, we can extrapolate lesser forms. “Having the phenomenon of our study in its acutest possible forms to start with, we can shade down as much as we please later. . . . By subtracting and toning down extravagances we may thereupon proceed to trace the boundaries of its legitimate sway.”<sup>35</sup> Our sources for these extremes follow James’s lead, incorporating autobiographical confessional accounts and personal accounts of religious transformation to convey the depths of emotional response provoked, and supplementing them with contemporary understandings of the biological underpinnings of these experiences. As James suggests in his survey, “Religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully-self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography.”<sup>36</sup> My own explorations bring contemporary scientific understanding to the task of examining such autobiographical works.

Because the work is framed as an extension of James’s phenomenological investigation, careful analysis of James’s own method and sources is appropriate. Consequently, those chapters of *The Varieties* in which James presents evidence for his range of religious experience have received particular attention. For each set of two lectures—on Healthy-Mindedness (Lectures IV and V), the Sick Soul (Lectures VI and VII), and Conversion (Lectures IX and X)—a detailed examination of sources has been undertaken. Findings of these analyses are summarized in the appropriate chapters, chapters 4, 5, and 6. By examining the sources that James utilized in his preparation of the lectures, one can determine the types of material he relied on and which types of materials should be included in an extension of his investigation. The singular exception is the use of the Internet. The Internet is a rich source of accounts of religious experience

that James doubtless would have used himself, had it been available in his day. James often relied on more “popular” sources such as pamphlets and short published accounts, which are no longer widely available and no longer as common a form of distribution. I have substituted the “popular” accounts found on the Internet for the pamphlets that were so readily available in James’s day.

Experience is central in James. Rather than focusing on our relationship to static objects, James proposes a stream of consciousness, a changing flow of attention and interest. Importantly, for his later work in *The Varieties* and *The Pluralistic Universe*, he notes that any one individual’s stream of consciousness will always be partial, never achieving totality. This vein would be picked up and developed by a student of Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It also brings us to consideration of another of James methodological mainstays—the critical role of pluralism.

### Pluralism

Arguably the greatest benefit of James’s pluralistic method is that it does not have a reductionist effect on the complexity of religious experience. James does not allow allegiance to one particular discipline to limit his view of religious experience or to reduce it to “nothing more than” one disciplinary perspective or another. As Edie observes, James demands that religious experience be “taken in its total meaning, as a complex skein of interlocking drives, emotions, desires, motives, ideas, and feelings which must be described in their intentional unity.”<sup>37</sup>

This suggests the importance of James’s emphasis on pluralism. James would argue that any approach informed by a single disciplinary perspective, like any monistic approach, is inevitably partial and incomplete. Only a pluralistic method can bring us closer to an approximation of truth or complete information.

James’s pluralistic method is tied to the limitations of bodily existence and closely related to his emphasis on teleological outcomes, or fruits. James focuses on the intentionality of religious experience; the continuity that comes from religious experience is consistently oriented toward relationship or communication with the Divine, rather than the means by which that relationship is experienced or asserted. This means that the sense of meaning involved in the entire dimension of religious experience is inseparable from the study of that experience and cannot be reduced to a side effect, or incidental consideration. Consistent with James’s criteria of outcome, ethical dimensions and implications must also play a part in our investigation. James will judge “by the fruits,” and “the fruits” will serve as evidence for the reality and relative impact of religious experience.

Both ethical action and human experience are grounded in the body. And as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, any theory grounded in the body is already a

theory of perception and will have limits imposed by that conceptual framework. In a classic and oft-cited example, he writes:

From the point of view of my body I never see as equal the six sides of the cube, even if it is made of glass, and yet the word “cube” has a meaning; the cube itself, the cube in reality, beyond its sensible appearances, has *its* six equal sides. As I move round it, I see the front face, hitherto a square, change its shape, then disappear, while the other sides come into view and one by one become squares. But the successive stages of this experience are for me merely the opportunity of conceiving the whole cube with its six equal and simultaneous faces, the intelligible structure which provides the explanation of it.<sup>38</sup>

Such is the human condition. We can only know objects through our own experience of them, which, in turn, will define our view of reality. Our view of reality is based on our experience. In fact, one phenomenologist, Aron Gurwitsch, asserts that the whole structure of James’s philosophy, given this importance on the limits and selectivity of attention, is a “teleological conception of the human mind.”<sup>39</sup> For James, our reality is determined by where we direct our attention. And where we direct our attention is inextricably linked to our embodiment and our prior experience, particularly in terms of religious experience.

One begins to see a consistency in the method that James brings to the writing of his major works. Like *The Principles* and *The Varieties*, the method reflects his fundamental beliefs in terms of his “philosophical anthropology.” Pluralism lies at the heart of that conception, which later informs his philosophy of religious pluralism in *A Pluralistic Universe*. Just as James rejects the reductionistic method of “medical materialism” in *The Varieties*, he refuses to be reductionistic in the distinction between monism and pluralism. In the tension between monism and pluralism, James will consistently assert that our experience (attention) is only partial, and therefore we must always be ready to acknowledge a multiplicity of experiences beyond our own limited repertoire or awareness. Monism will always impose a perspective that ultimately proves limited and totalizing. Even if some unified transcendent exists, James would assert, it will still be perceived differently by different experiencing selves.

### Probabilism

The dictionary defines *probabilism* as “the doctrine that certainty is impossible, but that probability suffices to govern belief and action.”<sup>40</sup> Today, in the aftermath of widespread acceptance of Darwin’s theories of evolution, our culture largely accepts probabilism and probabilistic approaches. This was not always the case. Baconianism informed the era, so to speak, of James’s father and many of his associates. Many in the early nineteenth

century saw the naturalistic scientific methods as something that could be put into divine service, that science would lead to the discovery of an absolute and unifying religious understanding.

William James was resolute about never becoming an active member in any church or congregation, suggesting that he had had enough exposure to dogmatic interpretations for a lifetime. One of his favorite sparring partners, his intellectual opposite, as Ralph Barton Perry so rightly points out, was the man who argued so strongly for the importance of the ideal and the place of the beloved community, Josiah Royce.<sup>41</sup>

James's own struggles with identity, his delays in achieving his medical degree, and his uneasy relationship with his father, as Paul Jerome Croce suggests, may well be related to his careful observation of profound changes in scientific method. These came to a head when his own mentor and teacher, Louis Agassiz, informed by naturalistic methods, struggled with the growing influence of Darwin's probabilistic theories in the *Origin of the Species*. James's close attention is assured, according to Croce, by the fact that he employs probabilism in *The Varieties*, and it is his acceptance of probabilism, without the need to impose certainty, that makes James so comfortable and appealing to readers throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

This shift away from the comfortable certainty of naturalistic method to the ever evolving landscape of probabilism, emphasized by his own youthful struggles with the religious certainty of his father, no doubt played important roles in the central assertions of *The Pluralistic Universe*. Expanding from his engagement with monism in *The Varieties*, informed by the multiple selves and selective attention of *The Principles*, James will consistently argue for the acknowledgment and tolerance of multiple limited views, and against the imposition of any monistic, or dogmatically limited, perspective on the whole of humankind.

In its entirety, elements of *The Pluralistic Universe* anticipate in many ways Carl Jung's understanding of the collective unconscious and of the role the individual plays in a force greater than the life of the single individual. One wonders what the nature of their conversation was when they met at Clark a few years before James's death. The ideas eventually outlined in *The Pluralistic Universe* are not just purely philosophical or psychological, but close to theological. Had he studied theology, James may very likely have become an ethicist, because his focus on the fruits of religious experience consistently demonstrates his emphasis on the teleological.

### "The Fruits"

*The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a strikingly unique phenomenology of religion, and remains unsurpassed. James sees the human animal, as well as the religious person, as moving toward selected goals and eager to find legiti-

mate explanations for that which we wish to do regardless. As my grandmother used to say, with full respect to her listeners, "Do what you damn well please, you will anyway." James suggests believers seek similar approval but ultimately follow the same course. Or, as James observes in a more complex fashion, "The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious spheres, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion."<sup>42</sup>

But James's "teleological" conception of the mind will direct his attention to the practical results of belief, the "fruits," and not simply their professed justification. Neither could his conception of the self be simple, unified, or static. It will distinguish between all the selves we have been in the past and the self that is experiencing the flow of today, of this moment, even the self we are before the world is divided into realms of subject and object. James's perspective is a very physiological view in that regard, reflecting his medical training.

Given these perspectives, it was natural for James to focus on conversion—to the changing conception of one's religious self—and to develop not a monistic, normative framework, but a conversion typology, a framework for presentation of varieties. But perhaps most impressive is the sheer breadth of information collected that informs his views, and his refusal to pigeonhole religious experience, to limit it down to even the most attractive of corners.

In *The Varieties*, James does, admittedly and self-consciously, focus more on the world of the individual than the collective, and on Christian more than other belief systems, but his exploration of individual religious experience is strikingly broad. He looks at conversion, at the psychological dimensions of individual temperament, at saintliness, at mysticism, and at the philosophy of religion. He states, almost from the start, that he will look at extremes in religious experience in terms of positive and negative, of healthy and unhealthy, of Protestant and Catholic, of active and contemplative. He explores the authority of mystical experience for experiencer and for others, and has a particular fascination for the lives of founders.

But for James the authority, the actual evidence of the profound interior experience will always be tied to its expression. We cannot observe, or share, the profound interior experience that drives the individual "who lives in his religious centre of personal energy, and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms."<sup>43</sup> But we can observe the activities that they evoke, and James will place considerable evaluative weight on that expression.

### WILLIAM JAMES A CENTURY LATER

As we find upon closer examination, James still has quite a bit to teach us a century after he penned his works. Today, we find James read by a surprisingly diverse group of scholars and researchers. He is read and commented

on by those in neurology, in the behavioral sciences, and in neurocognitive and neurohormonal studies. He is read by psychologists as a unique "founder" of the discipline. He continues to be read by theologians and scholars of religion and by those working at the intersection of psychology and religion. And he is read by philosophers working on his uniquely American stream of philosophical thought, as well as by those whose interest moves toward his European progeny that have descended through Husserl.

In part this reflects James's own shifting identity through his life—from artist to medical doctor, from medical doctor to psychologist, from psychologist to scholar of religion, and from a scholar of religion to philosopher. But is it simply the historical identification that brings readers from such diverse areas to study William James today, or is it that in a striking way James anticipated streams of development only recognized in the next century in these disparate fields?

Antonio Damasio, a neurologist who studies the links between emotion and cognition, believes James's theory of emotion—long discounted as incorrect—is actually closer to our understanding of feeling and emotion today. As will be addressed at greater length in chapter 3, Damasio believes the mechanisms he identifies to bring about emotion "are compatible with William James's original formulation on this theme. . . . None of the features I have added undermines or violates the basic idea that feelings are largely a reflection of body-state changes, which is William James's seminal contribution to this subject."<sup>44</sup> Damasio's work is sparking renewed interest in James's theory on the origins of emotion and its relationship to cognition and moral thinking.

Psychology has taken a broad turn toward the biological in the past two decades of the twentieth century. This has brought renewed interest in James's more biologically based psychological approach. The development of studies in dissociation, along with studies of resiliency and traumatic studies, also have focused attention on alterations in consciousness and brought renewed interest to the "polypsychic" psychological model that James used and shared with such early notables as Pierre Janet and Théodule Ribot. Work by historians of psychology such as Eugene Taylor have unearthed James's previously unrecognized research in exceptional mental states, giving greater depth and understanding of the continuity of James's research interests throughout his life but also helping us to better understand the complexity and sophistication of the model James's employed.<sup>45</sup>

The significant wake James left in philosophical thought continues to have its effects. Given his influence on Husserl, it is relatively easy to track indirect influence on the students of Husserl, as noted above. These include Maurice Merleau-Ponty's psychological phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical existentialism, Emmanuel Levinas's continental philosophy and Levinas's influence on Jacques Derrida, and the recently canonized

Edith Stein. As Eugene Taylor observes, through William James's breakthrough perception of conscious and object as the same functional complex "we have the germ of phenomenology, contextualism, and modern hermeneutic analysis, all of which can trace their origin through various routes back and then across James's path."<sup>46</sup>

So perhaps it is time, after a long romance with ethnography and anthropology, for religious studies to turn back to William James with a fresh eye and give him serious consideration. Perhaps it is time to see what an extension of James's landmark study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, might yield in the century since its original publication. James often employs terms that were common in his day but that have since become obscure—the mind-cure movement, for example. When these are translated into terms more in keeping with popular usage today and put into dialogue with new information from the behavioral sciences, we might find that William James's thought still speaks to us, still has the power to teach us a thing or two. We might find that James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* has lessons we have forgotten at our peril, that we need to be reminded of for our collective spiritual health. James has certainly taught me a thing or two over the past several years. Having come full circle with James, I'm ready and willing to begin the journey again.

## NOTES

1. William James, cited in Paul Jerome Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 225.
2. Erik H. Erikson, "The Nature of Clinical Evidence," *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 67.
3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902).
4. Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 1. of 2, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935–36), 165, as quoted in James M. Edie, "William James's Phenomenology of Religious Experience," in *William James and Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 49–64, 52.
5. "James, William (1842–1910)," *Literary Encyclopedia*, <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=2340> (21 June 2004).
6. James, *Varieties*, 22–23.
7. "In his Lowell Lecture on degeneration, James defined the 'neurotic constitution' and the 'psychopathic temperament' as 'a mind discordant with itself that doesn't keep together,' subject to 'impulses and obsessive ideas.' From the *Varieties* we learn that James thought that religious biographies often depicted persons with psychopathic temperaments accompanied by automatisms, such as the sense of being the instrument of a higher power (inspiration), sudden perceptions or convictions of new truth, and/or obsessive compulsive action." See Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Ann Taves believes the term *psychopathic* has

changed in meaning from the original meaning James intended. Discussing George Fox, James writes, "From the point of view of his nervous constitution, Fox was a psychopath or *détracqué* of the deepest dye," *Varieties*, 7. Taves notes, "Contrary to today's usage, James did not mean to suggest that Fox was amoral or antisocial. Rather James used 'psychopath' or 'psychopathic temperament' to refer to a mind that was to some degree 'unbalanced' or 'unintegrated,'" 277-78. This subject will again surface in chapter 5, and these cautions will be repeated.

8. James, *Varieties*, 145.

9. Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2000), 287.

10. van der Kolk, Bessel A., *Psychological Trauma*, Washington D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, Inc. 1987, xi.

11. van der Kolk, *Psychological Trauma*, xi.

12. See Lynn Bridgers, "Trauma and Transformation: Traumatic Experience and the Conversions of Three Spanish Mystics," M.A. thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, 1998; Lynn Bridgers, "Overwhelming Grace: Traumatic Incidence and Reporting in Medieval Mystics," unpublished paper, 1997; and Lynn Bridgers, "Sacred Territory: Illness in the Lives of Women Mystics," unpublished paper, 1997.

13. Kagan, Jerome. *Galen's Prophecy: Temperament in Human Nature*. New York: Basic Books, 1998, xvii.

14. James, *Varieties*, 2-3.

15. James, *Varieties*, 3.

16. James, *Varieties*, 3.

17. James, *Varieties*, 3.

18. James, *Varieties*, 3.

19. James M. Edie, "Notes on the Philosophical Anthropology of William James," in *William James and Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 65-80, 67.

20. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890).

21. Charles Hobbs explains the reasoning behind Edie's comment about Hegel, citing the work of historian of phenomenology Herbert Spiegelberg. Hobbs writes, "The great historian of phenomenology, Herbert Spiegelberg has said "Phenomenology" is, in the 20th century, mainly a name for a philosophical movement whose primary objective is the direct investigation and description of phenomena as consciously experienced, without theories about the causal explanation and as free as possible from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions. The term itself is much older, going back at least to the 18th century, when Johann Heinrich Lambert, in his *Neues Organon* (1764), applied it to that part of his theory of knowledge which distinguishes truth from illusion and error. In the 19th century it became associated chiefly with Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), which undertook to trace the development of the human spirit from mere sense-experience to "absolute knowledge." The so called Phenomenological Movement did not get under way until the first decade of the 20th century. . . . Phenomenology was not founded: it grew," Herbert Spiegelberg, *Doing Phenomenology* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 3, as cited in Charles A. Hobbs, "Was William James a Phenomenologist?" *Streams of William James*, 5, no. 3 (2003): 8-13, n. 5.

22. Marcel Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), vii.

23. James rejected equating origin and value, linking value to function by means of a comparative methodology. See Ann Taves's insightful discussion of the same, in *Fits, Trances, and Vision*, 272, and discussion of the same in chapter 6 of this book.

24. W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Forth Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 299; also cited in Hobbs, "Was William James a Phenomenologist?" 9.

25. See Eugene Taylor, "James and Existential Phenomenology," in *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 189-90.

26. Edie, "Notes on the Philosophical Anthropology of William James," 68. Edie considers the work of Aron Gurwitsch (*La théorie du champ de la conscience* [Paris: Desdee de Brouwer, 1957]) and Johannes Linschoten (*Auf dem Weg zu einer phänomenologischen Psychologie, Die Psychologie von William James* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1961]) to be invaluable in identifying links between the thought of James and the development of European phenomenology.

27. James M. Edie, "William James's Phenomenology of Religious Experience," in *William James and Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 49-64, 50.

28. Edie, "William James's Phenomenology," 51.

29. James, *Varieties*, 334-35.

30. Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 18.

31. See, for example, the development of liberation theology with its emphasis on structural sin and the transformation of social structure rather than a focus on the heart of the individual believer.

32. James notes, "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," *Varieties*, 334-35. He sees this as part of an evolutionary process. "A genuine first-hand religious experience like this is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine proves contagious enough to spread to any others, it become a definite and labeled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes itself an orthodoxy; and when a religion has become an orthodoxy; its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. The new church, in spite of whatever human goodness it may foster, can be henceforth counted on as a staunch ally in every attempt to stifle the spontaneous religious spirit, and to stop all later bubbleings of the fountain from which in purer days it drew its own supply of inspiration," *Varieties*, 337.

33. Paul Tillich, "Courage and Participation," in *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 102.

34. James, *Varieties*, 45.

35. James, *Varieties*, 50.

36. James, *Varieties*, 3.

37. Edie, "William James's Phenomenology," 57.

38. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, [1962] 1999), 203.

39. Edie, "Notes on the Philosophical Anthropology of William James," 71, citing Gurwitsch in *Theorie du champ de la conscience*, 31ff.

40. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1959), 672.

41. Ralph Barton Perry, *In the Spirit of William James* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1938). See especially chapter 1, "Two American Philosophers: William James and Josiah Royce."

42. James, *Varieties*, 74.

43. James, *Varieties*, 267.

44. Damasio, Antonio R. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1999, 287–288.

45. Eugene Taylor, *William James on Exceptional Mental States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

46. Eugene Taylor, "Biological Consciousness and the Experience of the Transcendent: William James and American Functional Psychology," <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/Mind/James.html> (10 August 2004).