

## **VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS DECEPTION**

### **A Critique of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, by William James**

William James is one of the early writers in the "psychology of religion," a field which attempts to survey, describe, understand, and *evaluate* religious experiences in terms of the theories of modern psychology.<sup>1</sup> Christians must beware of this effort, in that the value system of psychology is set above God and His Word, seeking to pass judgment on Him. Clearly, this is an anti-Christian endeavor.

James affirmed the following as "the perennial meaning of religion" (p. 435):

- "1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
2. that union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end;
3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof--be that spirit 'God' or 'law'--is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world."

These statements blatantly deny the Creator-creature distinction.

This book resulted from an assignment James was given to lecture on "natural religion" at the University of Edinburgh. "Natural religion," according to the introduction written by Jaroslav Pelikan, had previously been "defined as a philosophical theology unrelated not only to traditional claims of divine revelation but to the concrete world of religious experiences." James is said to have revolutionized that definition by looking at "natural religion" from the perspective of the *subject*, in his subjective experience, rather than looking at religion in terms of the *object*: God, the universe, or revelation (xi).

The introduction states that James attempted to give respectful treatment to *all* varieties of "religious experiences," regardless of his personal agreement with the underlying assumptions (xi). He undertook a supposedly *scientific* study of religion, which "made it impossible for him to be a literalist about religious myths and dogmas" (xi). James claimed to be open

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed evaluation of this "psychology of religion" school, see Discernment's paper, "Van Til In Dialogue--and in Conflict!--With Modern Psychology." Both James and Van Til note the writings of American Professors Leuba, Starbuck, and Coe in this field.

to all religious data, *rejecting absolutes* (xv). He claimed to be doing a "descriptive survey" of religious experiences (12), considering religious experiences biologically and psychologically, *handling these facts like other facts of history* (14). He expressed indifference to the question of immortality (xvi).

James admits that he is *not* a theologian, but rather a *psychologist*:

"To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution." (12)

The subject of his study, being a "psychological inquiry," is "religious feeling and religious impulses" in man, not religious institutions as such (12).

James raises certain questions about religion that he seeks to answer (13): What is its nature? What is its origin? What is its importance? As we will see, his criteria for determining truth is anything but *biblical*. Man, whose mind is corrupted by sin, is set up as the judge of God!

In the closing words of his book, James stated his desire to see the monotheism of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam "yield to something closer to polytheism...theological 'pluralism'" (xvii):

"I think...that a final philosophy of religion will have to consider the *pluralistic hypothesis* more seriously than it has hitherto been willing to consider it. For practical life at any rate, the *chance* of salvation is enough." (469)

But it is not "enough"! Such an opinion in one which is open to all religious data *except* Christian theism, which claims *exclusive* truth and the only way of salvation.

## **Presuppositions**

It is clear that in spite of claims to the contrary, James is not in a neutral position concerning religious experience. In his discussion of the relationship between philosophy and religion, James concludes that:

"It fails to prove its pretension to be 'objectively' convincing.... It does not banish differences; it founds schools and sects just as feeling does. The logical reason of man operates, in short, in this field of divinity exactly as it has always operated in love, or in patriotism, or in politics, or in any other of the wider affairs of life, in

which our passions or our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand. It finds arguments for our conviction, for indeed it *has* to find them. It amplifies and defines our faith, and dignifies it and lends it words and plausibility. It hardly ever engenders it; it cannot now secure it." (392)

There is no *neutral* religious territory. James clearly admits this here. He also acknowledges his "inability to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism" (465). He does believe that "in communion with the Ideal new force comes into the world" (465). Throughout the entire book, this bias is crystal clear. While James insists that he merely *describes*, but does not *judge*, his presuppositions are anti-Christian to the core. We cannot expect to find *truth* on such a foundation.

## Truth

Before we review James' consideration of religion, we must closely examine his view of *truth*.

**Scripture.** God reveals His truth in His Word, the ultimate authority. Christians can be rightly alarmed by what James says concerning the Scriptures:

"Every religious phenomenon has its history and its derivation from natural antecedents. What is nowadays called the higher criticism of the Bible is only a study of the Bible from this existential point of view, neglected too much by the earlier church." (13)

Note carefully that James rejects the *supernatural origin* of God's revelation, preferring a natural, human origin. James believes that a study of the Bible would be doomed if we affirmed it to "have been composed automatically or not by the free caprice of the writer," and to be free of either scientific or historic error. He clearly prefers a theory which assumes that "a book may well be a revelation in spite of errors and passions and deliberate human composition." It is sufficient for James that it be "a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crisis of their fate" (14).

This is a clearly fallacious view of God's Word, which is *breathed out by God Himself* (2 Timothy 3:16). It is both inerrant and authoritative.

**"Explanations" of religion.** James notes the tendency to discredit states of mind that one dislikes, including the "explanation" of religious experiences in psychological terms (19). Such tendencies are clearly evident in the blasphemous

writings of Sigmund Freud, who attempts to discredit Christianity by "explaining" it.

James also notes the explanation of religious experiences by "medical materialism":

"Modern psychology, finding definite psycho-physical connections to hold good, assumes as a convenient hypothesis that the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions must be thorough-going and complete." (21)

However, James goes on to ask whether such explanations can possibly determine the *spiritual significance* of an experience (21). He affirms an *organic* explanation for both religious and non-religious experiences:

"So of all our raptures and our drynesses, our longings and pantings, our questions and beliefs. They are equally organically founded, be they of religious or non-religious contents." (22)

However, James asks: "When we think certain states of mind superior to others, is it ever because of what we know concerning their organic antecedents? No!" (22). James wants to "explain" religion and yet make room for it in some sense.

James admits that *feeling*, religious or otherwise, is not a proper criteria for objective, universal truth:

"What immediately feels most 'good' is not always most true, when measured by the verdict of the rest of experience.... There are moments of sentimental and mystical experience...that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come...the rest of life makes either no connection with them, or tends to contradict them more than it confirms them." (23)

Indeed, feelings do not determine truth! However, James cannot offer a superior alternative, because he rejects outside supernatural revelation such as we find in Scripture. The view that religious revelations are received from *outside* the human mind is one that James refutes because such revelations "corroborate incompatible theological doctrines...they neutralize one another and leave no fixed result" (459). Having thus rejected God's self-attesting revelation, James leaves us adrift on a sea of relativity and uncertainty.

**Religion and Science.** James believes that both religion and science are "genuine keys for unlocking the world's treasure house," but that "neither is exhaustive or exclusive of the

other's simultaneous use." Both are "co-eternal," he claims (116). However, he is hopeful that philosophy can transform itself "from theology into science of religions":

"By confronting the spontaneous religious constructions with the results of natural science, philosophy can also eliminate doctrines that are now known to be scientifically absurd or incongruous." (408)

God's eternal standards of truth are clearly bypassed in this scenario.

James' consideration of science also leads to a discussion of the very nature of reality, which he sees as intensely personal:

"So long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*" (446)

Applying his theory to scientific endeavors, he says that:

"It is absurd for science to say that the egotistic elements of experience should be suppressed. The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places." (447)

Man has replaced God as the center of the universe here!

James sees private religious experience, "egotistic" as it may be, as in some sense superior to the realities explored by science:

"The individual's religion may be egotistic, and those private realities which it keeps in touch with may be narrow enough; but at any rate it always remains infinitely less hollow and abstract, as far as it goes, than a science which prides itself on taking no account of anything private at all." (447)

In fact, James is more concerned with the preservation of "private destiny" as the *most ultimate reality* of all, despite religious "errors" of past centuries:

"It does not follow, because our ancestors made so many errors of fact and mixed them with their religion, that we should therefore leave off being religious at all. By being religious we establish ourselves in possession of ultimate reality at the only points at which reality is given us to guard. Our responsible concern is with our private destiny, after all." (448)

**A new "science of religions."** James make it clear that he wants to establish a "science of religions" that would "depend for its original material on facts of personal experience, and would have to square itself with personal experience through all its critical reconstructions" (409).

He sets up the *unbeliever* as best suited to play the role of "scientist" in such an undertaking:

"A science might come to understand everything about the causes and elements of religion, and might even decide which elements were qualified, by their general harmony with other branches of knowledge, to be considered true; and yet the best man at this science might be the man who found it hardest to be personally devout." (438)

James notes a tension between personal religious faith and scientific observations:

"The religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns. Science, on the other hand, has ended by utterly repudiating the personal point of view." (440)

James is not encouraging about the potential results, in view of the hostility between science and religion that he observed in his own time:

"The consequence is that the conclusions of the science of religions are as likely to be adverse as they are to be favorable to the claim that the essence of religion is true. There is a notion in the air about us that religion is probably only...a mode of thought which humanity in its more enlightened examples has outgrown." (439)

In his examination of religion in this "enlightened" scientific age, James denies God's revelation in Psalm 19 and Romans 1:

"The days are over when it could be said that for Science herself the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork." (440)

James looks *solely within man*, and not to the abundant and overpowering evidence of God's creative work, to make sense of religious experience. This is a fatal theological error!

He also errs in his acceptance of evolution, a *theory* that is both unbiblical *and* scientifically discredited:

"The Darwinian notion of chance production, and subsequent destruction, speedy or deferred, applies to the largest as well as to the smallest facts." (440)

James overlooks the fact that without the sovereign God of Scripture, who created and controls all things, there could be no science. In a world ruled by "chance production," there would be no production. James errs both biblically and scientifically.

**Religion and "the facts."** Religion, says James, does more than illuminate facts already in existence. Religion postulates *new facts*:

"The world interpreted religiously is not the materialistic world all over again, with an altered expression; it must have, over and above the altered expression, a *natural constitution* different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have." (462)

James, however, is agnostic concerning these "divine facts," other than "the actual inflow in energy in the faith-state and the prayer-state." He is persuaded that "our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness" (463).

One of the major problems with this view of the "facts" is that James wholly ignores the historical realities on which Christianity is based. Such historical facts must be interpreted according to God's revelation. In fact, God is the Creator and interpreter of *all* the *facts* of existence, whether visible or invisible realities.

**Empirical evidence and intuitive knowledge.** James devotes an early chapter of his book to the "reality of the unseen." This reality, he claims, exists in the *mind* of the religious individual rather than in objective reality that is applicable to all persons:

"The more concrete objects of most men's religion, the deities whom they worship, are known to them only in idea.... The whole force of the Christian religion, therefore, so far as belief in the divine personages determines the prevalent attitude of the believer, is in general exerted by the instrumentality of pure ideas, of which nothing in the individual's past experience directly serves as a model." (55)

This is in radical opposition to the words of Scripture! The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes *eyewitness testimony* coupled with God's interpretation of key events such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ:

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have touched, concerning the Word of life--the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and manifested to us--that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full." (1 John 1:1-4)

Yet James insists that "religion is full of abstract objects which prove to have an equal power." Such "abstract objects," according to James, include the attributes of God (56). In fact, he says, "the absence of definite sensible images is positively insisted on by the mystical authorities in all religions" (56). *But true Christianity is not based on "mystical authority"!*

James describes Kant's view about these "abstract objects":

"These things, he said, are properly not objects of knowledge at all. Our conceptions always require a sense-content to work with, and as the words 'soul,' 'God,' 'immortality,' cover no distinctive sense-content whatever, it follows that theoretically speaking they are words devoid of any significance." (56)

However, Kant concluded that "we can act as if there were a God"!

"So we have the strange phenomenon, as Kant assures us, of a mind believing with all its strength in the real presence of a set of things of no one of which it can form any notion whatsoever." (56)

This flatly rejects Christianity. Based on God's revelation in history, particularly in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we can form a "notion" concerning what we believe in!

James insists that:

"The way in which a platonizing writer like Emerson may treat the abstract divineness of things, the moral structure of the universe, as a fact worthy of worship." (58)

Here "facts" have replaced *God*, who *created those facts*, as the object of worship!

"It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,'* more deep and more



general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed." (59)

This quote is excellent evidence of the truth in Romans 1! God has revealed Himself clearly in the creation such that *man is without excuse*. But the unbeliever suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, exchanging the worship of God the Creator for the worship of the creation.

James continues to assert, throughout his writing, that religious "facts" are grounded in feeling rather than objective truth that can be independently verified:

"So far as religious conceptions were able to touch this reality-feeling, they would be believed in spite of criticism, even though they might be so vague and remote as to be almost unimaginable, even though they might be such non-entities in point of *whatness* as Kant makes the objects of his moral theology to be." (59)

After quoting several writers describing religious experiences, James says that:

"Such is the human ontological imagination, and such is the convincingness of what it brings to birth. Unpicturable beings are realized, and realized with an intensity almost like that of an hallucination." (72)

The eyewitness testimony given in the New Testament, however, is no hallucination, no imagination, but rooted in real fact.

James notes that mysticism (a heavy emphasis in his book) is opposed by rationalism, which "insists that all our beliefs ought ultimately to find for themselves articulate grounds," including abstract principles, facts of sensation, and logical conclusions based on those facts (72). However, he adds that:

"If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits." (73)

James clearly believes that intuitive knowledge is held more strongly than that derived from reason and logic:

"The immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow." (74)

Amazingly, James claims that he is not making any particular judgment concerning this mode of knowledge:

"I do not yet say that it is *better* that the subconscious and non-rational should thus hold primacy in the religious realm. I confine myself to simply pointing out that they do so hold it as a matter of fact." (74)

However, he does not prove--nor in fact even *attempt to prove*--that the claims of Christian theism are held in this "subconscious" or "non-rational" manner. He does not even respond to the eyewitness testimony of Scripture. He is biased against it from the outset, despite his claims to neutrality.

**Intellect and emotion.** As "thinking beings," says James, "we cannot exclude the intellect" (389). Nevertheless, he admits that he is "bent on rehabilitating the element of feeling in religion and subordinating its intellectual part...individuality is founded in feeling" (448). He asserts that the "faith state" is both biological and psychological, and that it "may hold a very minimum of intellectual content" (452).

It is useful to note the explanation James gives concerning his focus away from the intellectual religious content:

"The intellectualism in religion which I wish to discredit...assumes to construct religious objects out of the resources of logical reason alone, or of logical reason drawing rigorous inference from non-subjective facts." (389)

The result, says James, is "dogmatic theology, or philosophy of the absolute," where conclusions about truth are reached in an "a priori" manner (389). Another result is passionate loyalty:

"When...a positive intellectual content is associated with a faith-state, it gets invincibly stamped in upon belief, and this explains the passionate loyalty of religious persons everywhere to the minutest details of their so widely differing creeds." (452-453)

By this process *James rules out Christianity*. Believers must be passionately loyal to God's truth, contending for "the faith once-and-for-all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)! There is indeed "intellectual content" to our faith. The Bible calls it *sound doctrine*. James has already admitted the impossibility of eliminating *all* personal bias. The Christian begins and ends with God and His Word. Setting apart Christ in his heart as Lord, the believer is exhorted to be ready to answer anyone who questions him about the hope that is in him (1 Peter 3:15). James does not want to acknowledge that there is absolute, universal truth

applicable to all men. This is clear when he claims to state the issue that is before us:

"Feeling valid only for the individual is pitted against reason valid universally. The test is a perfectly plain one of fact. Theology based on pure reason must in point of fact convince men universally." (391)

True religion is not based on individual feeling. Nor is it based on "pure reason." Rather it is based on God's revelation to man, a revelation James refuses to accept. He insists that religion exercises some permanent function regardless of whether there is any intellectual content *at all*, and if there is, regardless of its actual *truth* (453). But this "religion," such as James will accept, is no religion at all. James himself admits the sad hopelessness of his position:

"In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless." (408)

As believers, we can be thankful for our glorious eternal *hope* that God has given. We are not left with man's "purely intellectual processes," tainted by sin, but rather we have the riches of God's divine revelation.

**How does James evaluate religious experience?** To answer this question, it is noteworthy that he does not regard religious experience as in any way unique:

"Who does not see that we are likely to ascertain the distinctive significance of religious melancholy and happiness, or of religious trances, far better by comparing them as conscientiously as we can with other varieties of melancholy, happiness, and trance, than by refusing to consider their place in any more general series, and treating them as if they were outside of nature's order altogether?" (30)

From a Christian perspective, God is indeed Lord over *all* of our experiences. However, James wants to set up the mind of man as the judge of *God*, His revelation, and His standards.

James is obviously concerned with the issue of truth when he asks whether religion reveals "anything distinct enough to be considered a general message to mankind" (450). But what is his answer? On what basis does he judge what is *true*?

Concerning religious opinions, James states that:

"Their value can only be ascertained by spiritual judgments directly passed upon them, judgments based on our own immediate feeling primarily; and secondarily on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true." (24)

Earlier, you might recall that James rejected mere *feeling* as a basis for discerning truth. But here he is, upholding *feeling* as the foundation on which we might evaluate religion!

His general approach can be best summarized as pragmatic: does it "work"? James asserts that "*philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness* are the only available criteria" for evaluating religious experience (25). He concludes that "by their fruits you shall know them, not by their roots" (26). James has a pragmatic approach to evaluating religious experiences, ignoring *truth*. He doesn't particularly care *if* God exists, or *what kind* of God exists. Earlier, he argued against judging the worth of a thing on the basis of its origins. Such judgments, he insists, must be made on strictly empirical grounds. Therefore, he later assigns value to the *fruit* of religious experience "*no matter what supernatural being may have infused it*" (219, emphasis added).

James cares only for results--results to be judged by purely *human* standards that ignore God's revelation. Here is what he says about the results of Christian conversion:

"The real witness of the spirit to the second birth is to be found only in the disposition of the genuine child of God, the permanently patient heart, the love of self eradicated." (220)

*But James refuses to limit such witness to Christian faith, insisting that it "is also found in those who pass no crisis, and may even be found outside of Christianity altogether" (220). Similar judgment is passed on the value of "higher" spiritual powers, using the same type of pragmatic, humanistic criteria:*

"The *value* of these forces would have to be determined by their effects, and the mere fact of their transcendency would of itself establish no presumption that they were more divine than diabolical." (223)

When he discusses "saintliness," James says that:

"We have to ask whether the fruits in question can help us to judge the absolute value of what religion adds to human life." (299)

James professes neutrality in this evaluative process. While admitting that "we cannot distinguish natural from supernatural effects," he insists that our evaluation must be one in which we "merely...collect things together without any special *a priori* theological judgments as to the value of this and that experience" (299). The basis for evaluation, according to James, is our own common sense, general philosophy, and instincts. On such a basis he presumes to "decide that *on the whole* one type of religion is approved by its fruits, and another type condemned" (300). God is neatly cut out of this picture!

James insists that we use:

"...human standards to help us decide how the religious life commends itself as an ideal kind of human activity. If it commends itself, then any theological beliefs that may inspire it, in so far forth will stand accredited" (303).

Human standards replace God's standards in this unbiblical scheme! James believes that religion accredits itself to man according to *human standards*, to the *needs* met, and he insists that "no religion has ever in the long run established or proved itself in any other way" (303). Later, "when they [religions] violated other needs too strongly, or when other faiths came which served the same needs better, the first religions were supplanted" (303). Such an approach *rules out Christian theism* from the very beginning. The God of Scripture--the true God!--cannot be "supplanted" by other gods or other faiths which better "serve" man. Man is to serve and glorify God, but James wants "God" to serve and glorify man.

**The rotten fruits of pragmatism.** Let us see how James' pragmatic approach works out in actual practice. How does he evaluate various aspects of religious faith?

"Religious excesses," negatively evaluated by James, are discussed at length:

"The fruits of religion...are, like all human products, liable to corruption by excess. Common sense must judge them." (310)

James evaluates excessive religious devotion as *fanaticism* (310), concluding that it can be eliminated by decreasing God's glory!

"As soon as the God is represented as less intent on his own honor and glory, it [fanaticism] ceases to be a danger." (312)

Where excessive purity occurs, in what James calls the "theopathic character," "the love of God must not be mixed with any other

love. Father and mother, sisters, brothers, and friends are felt as interfering distractions" (317).

Such an evaluation of "religious excesses" is one which radically defies Scripture and rejects Christianity. God's glory and honor are of prime concern to the Christian. Jesus clearly called believers to love *Him* more than all others, although certainly without failing to properly love other people.

James also takes a pragmatic approach in his evaluation of saints, who can be highly obnoxious according to his standards:

"By the very intensity of his fidelity to the paltry ideals with which an inferior intellect may inspire him, a saint can be even more objectionable and damnable than a superficial carnal man would be in the same situation." (335)

James sees "no absoluteness in the excellence of sainthood." Rather, "the individual saint may be well or ill adapted, according to particular circumstances" (339).

Biblically, a "saint" is one called by God to be a Christian believer. He is set apart to belong to God, to be holy. He is in the process of being *sanctified* by the power of God's Spirit. James evaluates the "saint" according to his humanly conceived standards, not according to God's revealed standards for righteousness and holiness.

In evaluating religion generally, James believes that success cannot be measured *absolutely*, but rather:

"... 'on the whole,' our abandonment of theological criteria, and our testing of religion by practical common sense and the empirical method, leave it in possession of its towering place in history." (340)

Ripping a biblical phrase from its context, James wants to make room for every variety of religion, excluding no one yet guaranteeing no one anything of eternal value:

"In our Father's house are many mansions, and each of us must discover for himself the kind of religion and the amount of saintship which best comports with what he believes to be his powers and feels to be his trust mission and vocation. There are no successes to be guaranteed and no set orders to be given to individuals, so long as we follow the methods of empirical philosophy." (340)

Jesus spoke of the many mansions in *His* Father's house, and He promised to prepare a place for *believers* in Him. Contrary to James, He *guaranteed* a place for those who truly belong to Him.

Most serious of all is that James attempts to sit in judgment on *God* and His attributes. (More about this later!) Defending pragmatism generally, he says that:

"If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance." (399)

Then, with the stroke of his pen, James arrogantly dismisses the attributes of God that concern His being, judging them irrelevant:

"So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind." (401)

However, these "metaphysical monsters" will hardly be irrelevant on Judgment Day! God is eternal, unchanging, and self-contained; man is none of these. In a world where change tosses us to and fro, where sin abounds, these attributes provide an anchor in the storm.

James does claim that the *moral* attributes of God "stand on an entirely different footing" pragmatically speaking (401). But having rejected God's revelation, he has no basis on which to specifically discern those moral qualities.

**Skepticism and the rejection of absolute truth.** James states that:

"Skepticism cannot...be ruled out by any set of thinkers as a possibility against which their [empiricist] conclusions are secure." (303)

Such a skeptical view *rules out* the confidence that believers place in the eternal, infallible Word of God:

"He who acknowledges the imperfections of his instrument, and makes allowance for it in discussing his observations, is in a much better position for gaining truth than if he claimed his instrument to be infallible.... If we claim only reasonable probability, it will be as much as men who love the truth can ever at any given moment hope to have within their grasp...all the insights of creatures of a day like ourselves must be provisional." (304)

As Christians, we acknowledge the imperfections, the sin, and the limitation of our own minds. However, at the same time we bow before our Creator and acknowledge His truth as comprehensive, infallible, and eternal. The Word He has given through revelation is likewise infallible and eternal. It is sufficient for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4), providing all that God determined we need to know for these purposes.

In view of his skepticism, James draws conclusions that Christians *must* reject. Truth is relative for James, leaving open the possibility of *more than one* system of truth:

"What, in the end, are all our verifications but experiences that agree with more or less isolated systems of ideas (conceptual systems) that our minds have framed? But why in the name of common sense need we assume that only one such system of ideas can be true?" (116)

This leads naturally to the view that *more than one religion* might be acceptable. James asks, "ought all men to have the same religion?" (304). His answer, throughout his writing, is clearly *no*.

**Philosophy and religion.** James notes the objection that "it is its *truth*, not its utility...upon which our verdict ought to depend" (341). He asks: "Is the sense of divine presence a sense of anything objectively?" (387). James insists that mysticism is "too private (and also too various) in its utterances to be able to claim a universal authority" (387). But perhaps philosophy can save us. Thus James goes on to ask: "Can philosophy stamp a warrant of veracity upon the religious man's sense of the divine?" (387). Philosophy, he claims, attempts to:

"...reclaim from mystery and paradox whatever territory she touches.... To redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances, has been reason's task." (388)

But as we saw in examining the *presuppositions* of James, philosophy is no savior. James has rejected the only source of universal, absolute truth: God the Creator. He has nowhere else to go. Lacking any absolute assurance or truth, he plunges into the depths of mysticism. Mysticism may have no *universal* truth, but perhaps it can offer *personal* truth for the individual. At least James hopes so!



## Mystic Sweet Communion

James cites a major premise of his work when he says that:

"Personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness." (342)

Thus James calls the chapter on mysticism his "vital chapter," even though he says of mystical experiences that "my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand" (342). He writes of mysticism as a spectator, not a participant.

James cites *four basic qualities* to mysticism:

**#1 Ineffability.** "It defies expression...no adequate report of its contents can be given in words." A mystical experience "must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others." (343)

**#2 Noetic Quality.** Mysticism includes "states of knowledge...states of insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect...revelations, full of significance...they carry with them a curious sense of authority." (343)

**#3 Transience.** "Mystical states cannot be sustained for long." (343)

**#4 Passivity.** "When the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance...as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.... Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance." (343-344)

James describes the simplest mystical experience as a "deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one" (344). The next step on the mystical ladder is "that sudden feeling, namely, which sometimes sweeps over us, of having 'been here before,' as if at some indefinite past time" (345). But beware, because James notes that in mysticism "there is something suggestive of pathology" (348). (He has company in the writings of Freud, Ellis, and the like, who consider religion pathological!)

Mysticism is supposedly rooted in another level of "consciousness." Our normal waking consciousness, according to James, is "but one special type of consciousness, while all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different" (349).

**"Cosmic Consciousness."** James also uses the term "cosmic consciousness" to describe mysticism, "a consciousness of the cosmos...of the life and order of the universe." There is a sense of "intellectual enlightenment" as well as "moral exaltation" and elation, wherein the person is "almost a member of a new species." He has a "sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life" (359).

James insists that this "cosmic consciousness" is methodically cultivated by Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christians (361). One method of cultivation is yoga, which "means the experimental union of the individual with the divine" (361). Another method of cultivating "cosmic consciousness" is the Buddhist practice of intense concentration, where desire is excluded and intellectual functions disappear. Then satisfaction decreases, and finally, "indifference, memory and self-consciousness are perfected." Even higher stages are claimed to be reached, "where there exists nothing" (362). The Sufi sect of Mohammedanism, with its pantheist orientation, also cultivates "cosmic consciousness" (362).

In addition, says James, "in the Christian church there have always been mystics...and a codified system of mystical theology" has been founded on their experiences (366). But James says that "it is odd that Protestantism, especially evangelical Protestantism, should seemingly have abandoned everything methodical in this line" (366). Now, he claims, "it has been left to our mind-curers to reintroduce methodical meditation into our religious life" (367). In a "Christian" setting, this is achieved through "the mind's detachment from outer sensations" followed by "an imaginary figure of Christ, for example, coming fully to occupy the mind" (367). The modern methods of "inner healing," practiced by Agnes Sanford, John and Paul Sanford, Ruth Carter Stapleton, and Rita Bennett, reflect this type of approach. So does the psychology of Carl Jung. This is extremely dangerous from a spiritual standpoint, grounded in beliefs diametrically opposed to biblical Christianity. True Christian faith is *not* mysticism, and mysticism is *not* Christian, regardless of the title provided by the mystics.

Pragmatism is again the standard for evaluation. Citing the Vedantists, James believes that the purity of discipline cultivating "cosmic consciousness" must be evaluated according to practical fruits (361).

**Mystic revelation of truth.** James discusses the revelation of *truth* through the avenue of mysticism:

"The kinds of truth communicable in mystical ways, whether these be sensible or supersensible, are various. Some of them relate to this world--visions of the future, the reading of hearts, the sudden understanding of texts, the knowledge of distant events, for example; but the most important revelations are theological or metaphysical." (370)

James reminds his readers that "we turned to mysticism precisely to get some light on truth. Do mystical states establish the truth of those theological affections in which the saintly life has its root?" (375). James sees an abundance of "paradoxical expressions" in mystical writings (376). But does paradox necessarily lead to *truth*? What kind of "truth"? James puts it like this:

"Does it furnish any warrant for the truth of the twice-bornness and supernaturalism and pantheism which it favors?" (381)<sup>2</sup>

James divides his answer into three parts.

**Authority/truth for the individual.** "Mystical states," he says, are "absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come" (381):

"If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way?" (382)

"Mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.... The mystic is, in short, *invulnerable*, and must be left...in undisturbed enjoyment of his creed." (382)

**Authority/truth for all men.** "No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically" (381). James tells us that there is less unanimity in mysticism than what he has portrayed to this point (383). Nevertheless, it is beyond doctrinal considerations and suits a variety of *different* theological positions:

"The mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own," being compatible with "the most diverse philosophies and theologies." (384)

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<sup>2</sup> Beware of the phrase "twice-bornness" here. A later section will demonstrate that "twice born" in this book is not the experience of being born again as a Christian believer!

James concludes, therefore, that "we have no right...to invoke its prestige as distinctively in favor of any special belief." Mysticism is only "relatively in favor" of such things as "absolute goodness" and "monistic identity" (384).

**Many "truths."** The authority of the *non-mystical* is broken down, opening the possibilities of "other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith" (381).

"The existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe." (385)

"There never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added, provided the mind ascend to a more enveloping point of view." (385)

Mystical revelations, according to James, "offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset" (386).

We are left adrift on a sea of relativity, where truth is about as stable as shifting sand in a hurricane. Thankfully, Christians know that James is dead wrong. God is not a "hypothesis." His Word is also not a "hypothesis." We have in Him eternal, absolute truth that is universally applicable to all men. In mysticism, we have nothing but sinful human distortion.

## **Religion Defined and Dissected**

The subject of this book is *religion*. Despite his admission that *feeling* does not determine truth, James nevertheless views feeling as the primary source of religion:

"I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue." (387)

He adds that intellect, apart from emotion, would never have led to religion:

"I doubt if dispassionate intellectual contemplations of the universe...would ever have resulted in religious philosophies such as we now possess." (388)

James again disregards the entire foundation of the Christian faith. He ignores God's revelation, and the fact that His revelation includes *intellectual* content.

**Pathology.** A key section near the beginning of the book reveals that James links religion with pathology. Here he has a lot of company within his profession! James says that "a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric" (15). James compares such a life to those who follow the conventional religion of their countries, a religion made by others for them. His study is clearly limited to the "eccentric," caring little for those who follow conventional religious practices:

"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." (15)

James believes that religious leaders exhibit "nervous instability," "emotional sensibility," and are "subject to abnormal psychical visitations" (15). This is the type of person he wants to study, however! Defending his position, James contends that:

"We cannot possibly ignore these pathological aspects of the subject. We must describe and name them just as if they occurred in non-religious men." (17)

The "pathological" origins of religious experience are evidently not a feature that alarms James:

"As regards the psychopathic origin of so many religious phenomena, that would not be in the least surprising or disconcerting, even were such phenomena certified from on high to be the most precious of human experiences." (30)

On the contrary, it is almost a selling point! Concerning the "psychopathic temperament," James states that "what...is more natural than that this temperament should introduce one to regions of religious truth, to corners of the universe" not otherwise accessible (30). Although rejecting the supernatural, James goes so far as to say that a person of "pathological" temperament might even be the best suited to received divine revelation:

"If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity." (31)

Thus religion is relegated to the realm of pathology, but with a smile of approval. As believers, we obviously cannot agree.

**Institutional vs. personal religion.** James believes that there is "one great partition which divides the religious field," the distinction between *institutional* and *personal* religion. The former is concerned with worship, sacrifice, "procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity," religious ceremony, theology, and ecclesiastical structure (34). The latter is distinctly different:

"In the more personal branch of religion it is on the contrary the inner dispositions of man himself which form the center of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness." (34)

This type of religion does not encourage acts of ritual, but instead "the individual transacts the business by himself alone," doing without priests or sacraments (34).

James ignores institutional religion in his writing, proposing to say little or nothing about church structure, systematic theology, "and the ideas about the gods themselves" (34). But he can do no such thing. He must and indeed does maintain some idea "about the gods themselves," an idea that *excludes* the true God from the outset.

**Religion defined.** James entertains a concept of religion that is polytheistic, diverse, pluralistic, and therefore remarkably parallel to the more recent New Age movement.

Because so many different religions exist, James concludes that "the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name" (32). James believes that "absolutism and one-sided dogmatism" results from oversimplification. He clearly favors diversity and rejects the Christian claim to exclusive truth:

"As there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act." (33)

James defines religion, for purposes of his book, in a highly personal manner:

"...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." (36)

James claims to escape "much controversial matter by this arbitrary definition" (36). While he may avoid controversy with many men, he sets off *eternal* controversy with God in this definition.

**Does religion include God?** Even the militant atheist, Albert Ellis, would say yes. But not James! His definition of religion does not assume that religion *must* include any deity! Buddhists, for example, have no God, and "modern transcendental idealism, Emersonianism, for instance, also seems to let God evaporate into abstract Ideality" (36).

James insists that "we must...from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds 'religions'" (38). He also asserts that "we must interpret the term 'divine' very broadly, as denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete deity or not" (38). However, he admits that the term "godlike" is "exceedingly vague" (38)!

"What then is that essentially godlike quality--be it embodied in a concrete deity or not--our relation to which determines our character as religious men?" (39)

According to James:

"...gods are conceived to be first things in the way of being and power.... Whatever then were most primal and enveloping and deeply true might at this rate be treated as godlike, and a man's religion might thus be identified with his attitude, whatever it might be, towards what he felt to be the primal truth." (39)

Religion, James says, is "a man's total reaction upon life." However, he goes on to claim that we can't define such a "reaction" too broadly for our purposes here (39).

While "god" is optional for James, leaving one free to worship anything or anyone, such idolatry must at the very least be practiced in the most solemn manner:

"There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious.... The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest." (42)

The prophets of Baal were surely quite serious and solemn when they cried out to their idol on Mount Carmel, but such solemnity failed to achieve the results they desired.

**Acceptance of the universe.** A key element of such experience, according to James, is a person's acceptance of the universe:

"At bottom the whole concern of both morality and religion is with the manner of our acceptance of the universe." (44)

"There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God." (49-50)

James recognizes different attitudes underlying such acceptance, however:

"It makes a tremendous emotional and practical difference to one whether one accept the universe in the drab discolored way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints." (44)

At first glance, James seems to affirm the superiority of a *Christian's* acceptance:

"How much more active and positive the impulse of the Christian writer to accept his place in the universe is!" (47)

In responding to suffering:

"The merely moralistic spurning takes an effort of volition...the Christian spurning is the result of the excitement of a higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required." (49)

The acceptance of the religious person is no mere escape:

"Religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer for escape. It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice--inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome." (51)

This *almost* sounds biblical, but here is how James summarizes his view of religious acceptance:



"When all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent positions of repose." (53)

But the Christian is not dependent on the *universe*! Rather, the believer can be confident in the eternal, sovereign Lord who *created* and controls the universe in which he lives. He is assured of final victory over all evil, because God has ordained and promised that it will be so. See the book of Revelation!

**The "progression" of religion.** James fails to recognize that God is eternal and unchanging. Instead, he views religion as a man-made entity that changes and progresses over time. He describes a progression in religion, from a "religious genius" who attracts disciples, to the organization of an institutional religion (305). That is when corruption supposedly sets in:

"The spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule are then apt to enter and to contaminate the originally innocent thing." (306)

This contrasts sharply with the personal, first-hand religious experience of the founder. But that experience is at first subject to misunderstanding or even ridicule:

"First-hand individual experience of this kind has always appeared as a heretical sort of innovation to those who witnessed its birth." (306)

"A genuine first-hand religious experience" is considered by James "a heterodoxy to its witnesses," experienced by a "lonely madman." Eventually, it is labeled *heresy*, but later becomes itself *orthodoxy* (307). At this point, James is ready to write it off as corrupt and institutionalized:

"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." (308)

Among those with "genuine first-hand religious experience" are Buddha, Mohammed, and Jesus, according to James (306). James also sees a progression in religion from Catholicism, to Lutheranism, to Calvinism, to Wesleyanism, and finally to liberalism--as if such changes produced a positive "progress" (196). Christians must clearly reject this evaluation of religion and its progression. We are concerned with God's *truth*, contending for the true faith delivered to the saints. Jesus, who is God

incarnate, can never be lumped together with Buddha and Mohammed, or other sinful humans who created a false religion. The progression from Catholicism to liberalism is not one that moves religion *forward* in every case. Liberalism is *anything but* real Christian faith, while the break from Catholicism was necessary to *preserve* that faith. The view presented by James is one that assumes a purely *human origin* for *all* religions. This assumption is *false* when applied to Christianity.

**Immortality.** James draws an analogy between "the Utopian dreams of social justice in which many contemporary socialists and anarchists indulge" and "the saint's belief in an existent kingdom of heaven" (327). Elsewhere, he quickly dismisses the question of personal immortality as an *irrelevant* issue (467). But he agrees in principle with the Buddhist notion of karma (466)!

**The "uses" and practices of religion.** James presumes to inquire about the *uses* of religion: its uses to the individual who has it, and the uses of the individual himself to the world (411). As if *God* existed to serve *man*!

James lumps all religions together in his evaluation of sacrifice, confession, and prayer. He believes religion to have progressed away from any literal form of sacrifice:

"Sacrifices to gods are omnipresent in primeval worship.... Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism get along without ritual sacrifice; so does Christianity, save in so far as the notion is preserved in transfigured form in the mystery of Christ's atonement. These religions substitute offerings of the heart, renunciations of the inner self." (414)

Christians are exhorted to present themselves as living sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1-2). However, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross remains eternally relevant as the basis for our salvation! There is nothing "primeval" or outdated about it.

James wants to speak of confession psychologically, as:

"...a more inward and moral stage sentiment...part of the general system of purgation and cleansing which one feels one's self in need of, in order to be in right relations to one's deity" (414).

But this statement conflicts with Scripture. Although we are certainly to confess our sins (1 John 1:9), it is the atonement of Christ--*His work alone*--that cleanses the believer and makes him right with the true God.

James emphasizes prayer, defining it as "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine" (416). Therefore, he concludes, "scientific criticism leaves it untouched" (416). According to James, "prayer in this wide sense is the very soul and essence of religion" (416), determining the sincerity of the worshiper:

"The genuineness of religion is thus indissolubly bound up with the question of whether the prayerful consciousness be or be not deceitful." (417)

But James does not recognize the sovereignty of God in his view of prayer. Like today's New Age movement, he sees it rather as a method of unleashing certain "forces" or "energy":

"Energy which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective, of the world of facts." (417)

Yet James also sees in prayer a "continuous sense of our connection with the power that made things as they are," not so much to change those outward realities, but so that we might receive them (424). In general, his view is incoherent, because he does not look to God's revelation in order to know what prayer really is or how God wants His people to pray.

**Religion and science.** James is not one to be behind the times. The "religion" he accepts as valid is certainly not the historic Christian faith, based on *facts* and *revelation*:

"The books of natural theology which satisfied the intellects of our grandfathers seem to us quite grotesque." (440)

Although we may have learned new facts about the physical world in recent times, the heavens continue to declare the glory of God and proclaim the works of His hands! And God's creation continues to leave man *without excuse* for his unbelief.

**Unity of all religions.** James is surely a friend to the New Age movement in his lumping together of *all* religions, ignoring the claims of Christian theism to hold *exclusive* truth. The qualities of "saintliness," he claims, are not found solely among Christians, nor are they confined even to theists:

"But these affections are certainly not mere derivatives of theism. We find them in Stoicism, in Hinduism, and in Buddhism in the highest possible degree.... Religious rapture, moral enthusiasm, ontological wonder, cosmic emotion, are all unifying states of mind, in which the sand

and grit of the selfhood incline to disappear, and tenderness to rule." (256)

Christians, however, do not seek "unifying states of mind" as do New Age converts.

Even self-denial is not exclusively Christian in nature, according to James:

"This abandonment of self-responsibility seems to be the fundamental act in specifically religious, as distinguished from moral practice. It antedates theologies and is independent of philosophies. Mind-cure, theosophy, stoicism, ordinary neurological hygiene, insist on it as emphatically as Christianity does, and it is capable of entering into closest marriage with every speculative creed." (265)

Bear in mind, however, that Jesus Christ called for self-denial *for the cause of the gospel*. He never called for the ascetic self-salvation found in false religions.

James wants to reduce all religions to their "lowest common denominator." He says that he is:

"...expressly trying to reduce religion to its lowest admissible terms, to that minimum, free from individualistic excrescences, which all religions contain as their nucleus, and on which it may be hoped that all religious persons may agree." (450-451)

While admitting that theology and intellectual content vary widely, James believes he can locate this "lowest common denominator" in terms of religious feeling and conduct:

"If you wish to grasp her [religion's] essence, you must look to the feelings and the conduct as being the more constant elements.... Both thought and feeling are determinants of conduct.... when we survey the whole field of religion, we find a great variety in the thoughts that have prevailed there; but the feelings on the one hand and the conduct on the other are almost always the same, for Stoic, Christian, and Buddhist saints are practically indistinguishable in their lives." (451)

James believes that these basic elements of all religions "may even some day all be united into one harmonious system" (451). This sounds remarkably like the New Age movement's agenda!

But James doesn't stop with feeling and conduct alone. He even proposes a "common nucleus" to all religious creeds,

consisting of two elements: first, an "uneasiness," and second, the solution to it:

"The solution is a sense that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers." (454)

But salvation is by faith in Christ alone!

"This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:11-12)

## **Sin and Evil**

It is hardly possible to discuss religion without *some* attempt to deal with the reality of sin in our world, and to reconcile that reality with a God who is *good*. When he considers the "moral attributes" of God, James says that:

"If dogmatic theology really does prove beyond dispute that a God with characters [moral attributes] like these exists, she may well claim to give a solid basis to religious sentiment."  
(402)

But James insists that this hasn't been accomplished. Kantian idealists, he says, reject such arguments, which "have never converted any one who has found in the moral complexion of the world, as he experienced it, reasons for doubting that a good God can have framed it" (402). So...James waves good-bye to dogmatic theology! Yet he can offer nothing stable in its place.

James makes the critical error of assuming that the mind of *man* defines evil:

"Much of what we call evil is due entirely to the way men take the phenomenon.... Refuse to admit their badness; despise their power; ignore their presence; turn your attention the other way; and so far as you yourself are concerned at any rate, though the facts may still exist, their evil character exists no longer. *Since you make them evil or good by your own thoughts about them, it is the ruling of your thoughts which proves to be your principal concern.*"  
(86-87, emphasis added)

This view is sinful. Man is not autonomous! God, not man, defines evil.

Much space is devoted to what James calls "healthy-minded" religion. Here we encounter a religious view that denies the reality of evil:

"Systematic healthy-mindedness, conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of being, deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision." (86)

The modern "mind-cure" religious perspective is cited by James as an example. The "mind-cure" view of disease and weakness is that it originates from "the *human sense of separateness* from that Divine Energy which we call God" (98). Biblically, man is indeed separated from God. That separation results from his *sin* against God, who is not "Divine Energy," but the personal Creator of the heavens and earth.

James notes Christian science as "the most radical branch of mind-cure in its dealings with evil. For it evil is simply a *lie*...the optimistic ideal of duty forbids us to pay it the compliment even of explicit attention" (103). James also notes the doctrine of Christian science that human thoughts are actual "forces" (103). Similar teachings are found in today's "faith" movement, where it is presumed that people can actually create their own reality by their thoughts. But this is not biblical. Evil is a *reality*. The denial of that reality confirms the truth of Romans 1:18. The unbeliever holds down the truth in unrighteousness!

In addition to such cults as Christian science, James notes that liberal theologian Harnack taught that "Jesus felt about evil and disease much as our mind-curiers do" (96). No, He didn't. Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead, in order to confirm His authoritative claim to be God in the flesh. Nowhere does Scripture hint that He denied the *reality* of evil! His dealings with sin and evil rather *confirm* their awful reality.

James points out the tension between believing in a good God and acknowledging the reality of evil, particularly on pantheistic (all is God!) assumptions:

"But on the monistic or pantheistic view, evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God; and the difficulty is to see how this can possibly be the case if God be absolutely good." (125)

James proposes that the solution to this difficulty is to reject monism, "to allow the world to have existed from its origin in pluralistic form, as an aggregate or collection of higher and lower things and principles, rather than an absolutely unitary

fact." This is the view of "healthy-minded" religion (125). According to "healthy-minded" religion:

"Evil...is emphatically irrational, and *not* to be pinned in, or preserved, or consecrated in any final system of truth. It is a pure abomination to the Lord, an alien unreality, a waste element, to be sloughed off and negated, and the very memory of it, if possible, wiped out and forgotten." (126)

Evil *is* a "pure abomination to the Lord," but it is *not* an "alien unreality." There are theological mysteries about evil that defy our finite comprehension. God is *sovereign* and fully in control, working all things according to the counsel of His own will. He is fully *in control* of the world's evil. At the same time, He hates sin and man is responsible for his sinful actions. We cannot comprehend *why* God, sovereign as He is, allowed evil to enter into the world. Nor can we comprehend *why* the first man, Adam, created good and upright, entered into sin. Similarly, Satan's fall remains shrouded in mystery. We know that *pride* was a key element, but not *why* a creature created *without sin* would fall. Nevertheless, evil exists, God is in control, and He is working all things together so that He is glorified. We know that He will one day bring history to a close and overthrow all the powers of evil *forever*. As mere creatures, we cannot expect to know more.

James does limit his "healthy-minded" religion to those individuals who are able to sustain an attitude that denies evil. But he sees the such a view is philosophically incoherent, and unacceptable to some persons:

"The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons.... But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth." (152)

James cannot offer a coherent or satisfying solution. He admits hopelessness:

"It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible." (153)

He notes that *some* evils work for a higher good, while others are too extreme to believe that good may come from them. Thus he tentatively concludes that:

"Since the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones, the philosophic presumption should be that they have some rational significance, and that systematic healthy-mindedness, failing as it does to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope." (153)

But this is inadequate. James fails to see God's sovereignty and providence at work, and he is blind to the fact that ultimately, and eternally, God will be glorified, even by the evil we live with today. But as we will see next, James is hopelessly confused about the nature and character of God.

### **Almighty God or "Higher Power"?**

**God's existence.** James admits that his attempt to evaluate religious experience must include *some* consideration of the existence of God:

"How can you measure their [religious experiences] worth without considering whether the God really exists who is supposed to inspire them? If he really exists, then all the conduct instituted by men to meet his wants must necessarily be a reasonable fruit of his religion--it would be unreasonable only in case he did not exist." (300)

He concludes that we must indeed be theologians:

"To this extent, to the extent of disbelieving peremptorily in certain types of deity, I frankly confess that we must be theologians." (300)

Remember, however, that James has specifically said that he is *not* a theologian, but a psychologist!

**Traditional proofs.** James rejects traditional proofs of God's existence, because people of his time had ceased to believe in this kind of God (or so he presumed!):

"That vast literature of proofs of God's existence drawn from the order of nature, which a century ago seemed so overwhelmingly convincing, today does little more than gather dust in libraries, for the simple reason that our generation



has ceased to believe in the kind of God it argued for."  
(73)

These traditional arguments--the cosmological, design and moral--according to James are "not solid enough to serve as religion's all-sufficient foundation" (393). They "prove nothing rigorously...they only corroborate our preexistent partialities" (394). In a footnote, James states that:

"When one views the world with no definite theological bias one way or the other, one sees that order and disorder, as we now recognize them, are purely human inventions." (394)

Again, man's mind *rather than God (!)* is what supposedly determines reality. James goes on to insist that we *know* that God *cannot* be the One worshipped by our forefathers, who *manifested His own glory!* However, he admits that he has no way to prove that we *know* any such thing (73).

When James is considering the "common nucleus" of all religious creeds, he makes the absurd proposal that "God" is merely an extended aspect of man:

"When stage 2 (the stage of solution or salvation) arrives, the man identifies his real being with the germinal higher part of himself; and does so in the following way. *He becomes conscious that this higher part is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.*" (454)

James goes on to ask about the objective existence of this "'MORE of the same quality' with which our own higher self appears" (454). He wants to formulate a hypothesis about the existence of the "something more," but in doing so he rejects taking the position of any particular theology, specifically mentioning Christianity (456). Clearly, we are headed in a diabolical direction!

Christians, says James, call the "higher part of the universe by the name of God." Thus he states that "the instinctive belief of mankind" is that "God is real since he produces real effect" (461). Here we're back to pragmatism. God does, indeed, "produce real effects." What James conveniently overlooks is that there would be absolutely no "effects" whatsoever if the God of Scripture did not exist.

Applying his pragmatic approach, James relies heavily on the specific *consequences* of God's existence in order to judge the reality of the matter:

"But all facts are particular facts, and the whole interest of the question of God's existence seems to me to lie in the consequences for particulars which that existence may be expected to entail." (465)

In considering what difference the existence of God would make, James claims to offer:

"...no hypothesis...beyond what the phenomenon of 'prayerful communion,' especially when certain kinds of incursion from the subconscious region take part in it, immediately suggests." (466)

Such "incursion from the subconscious region," James insists, is "something ideal, which in one sense is part of ourselves and in another sense is not ourselves," but which exerts an influence (467).

We'll see in the next section how James equates God with the "subconscious" part of man, effectively denying His existence altogether! Meanwhile, we must consider how to answer his rejection for the traditional "proofs" for God. Those arguments do have problems, but the Christian has answers. We must argue *transcendentally*, by showing the impossibility of the contrary. The unbeliever's position reduces to absurdity. Without the God of Scripture, for example, the concept of causation is meaningless. Without Him, there are no absolute universal moral standards by which the "problem of evil" can even be raised. The eternal, self-existent God of Scripture cannot not exist!

**God in the image of man.** We dare not miss the fact that James views God as *created by man* according to what he "needs" and can use. Thus he rejects certain "gods":

"...the older gods have fallen below the common secular level, and can no longer be believed in. Today a deity who should require bleeding sacrifices to placate him would be too sanguinary to be taken seriously." (301)

"We can no longer sympathize with cruel deities, and the notion that God can take delight in the spectacle of sufferings self-inflicted in his honor is abhorrent." (328)

James describes the "cruelty and arbitrariness" in the deity of our forefathers, the sovereignty and justice:

"But today we abhor the very notion of eternal suffering inflicted; and that arbitrary dealing-out of salvation and damnation to selected individuals." (302)

However, what man abhors or desires does *not* determine the character of God!

James falls back on the standards of psychology to "understand" how man has created "gods":

"Doubtless historic accidents always played some later part, but the original factor in fixing the figure of the gods must always have been psychological." (301)

James is describing *idolatry*, which is the foundation of *sin*. He sees man as creating the most "useful" deities, then abandoning them when their service was no longer needed or relevant:

"They could use him.... In any case, they chose him for the value of the fruits he seemed to them to yield. So soon as the fruits began to seem quite worthless; as soon as they conflicted with indispensable human ideals, or thwarted too extensively other values; as soon as they appeared childish, contemptible, or immoral when reflected on, the deity grew discredited, and was ere long neglected and forgotten." (301)

"The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another." (303)

"When we cease to admire or approve what the definition of a deity implies, we end by deeming that deity incredible." (303)

James takes his theory to the extreme that *it doesn't even matter whether God exists or not*, so long as man can "use" Him! He cites Professor Leuba, that "so long as men can use their God, they care very little who he is, or even whether he is at all" (453).

This is nauseating, in view of the fact that James makes absolutely no distinction between the truth of Christianity and the false faiths created by man! Paul said it so well in Romans 1, when he explained that man has exchanged the worship of the Creator for the worship of created things.

**Can we really know God?** James clearly answers "no" when he says:

"Whoever calls the Absolute anything in particular, or says that it is *this*, seems implicitly to shut it off from being

that--it is as if he lessened it.... The fountain-head of Christian mysticism is Dionysius the Areopagite. He describes the absolute truth by negatives exclusively." (376)

James can only conclude the following about religious experience:

"The only thing that it unequivocally testifies to is that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace...beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideas. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves.... It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized at all." (468)

"Other" and "larger"! That's the best James can offer. Perhaps the 12-step movement would appreciate this vague "higher power" concept, but Christians cannot. The God of Scripture is *personal*. He is distinct from His creation--"other"--but He is also intimately involved with His people and able to be known by them. Jesus Christ opened that "new and living way" for believers to approach the Father and live in relationship with Him.

**"Higher control."** An equally vague idea! When James examines the "feeling which immediately fills the hour of the conversion experience," he notes the "sense of higher control" that is present (224). As if that "sense" were a figment of the imagination! James believes that Protestant theology is consistent with his theory about experiencing this "sense of higher control," because "the self that consciously *is* can do absolutely nothing...redemption from such subjective conditions must be a free gift or nothing" (225). Indeed, salvation *is* a free gift of God's sovereign grace. But there really *is* "higher control," specifically *God's* control! It isn't a mere "sense" devoid of reality!

**"Union" with the divine.** James says that:

"When one's affections keep in touch with the divinity of the world's authorship, fear and egotism fall away." (425)

He sees "such a spirit" in Stoics (Aurelius and Epictetus), mind-curers, transcendentalists, and *liberal* Christians (425).

James sees a "union" with divinity in self-denial and asceticism:

"Since denial of the finite self and its wants, since asceticism of some sort, is found in religious experience to be the only doorway to the larger and more blessed life, this moral mystery intertwines and combines with the intellectual mystery in all mystical writings." (377)

Unfortunately, James equates mysticism with Paul's statement in Galatians 2:21, "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (377). However, mystic "union" with the divine is *not* the equivalent of the Spirit dwelling in the believer! The former flatly denies the Creator-creature distinction:

"This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note." (378)

All of these differing religions, according to James, are "perpetually telling of the unity of man with God" (378). Self is actually *God* on this view! James cites one writing where an author says that "you art thy Master and thy God. Thou art THYSELF the object of they search" (380). This is a diabolical distortion of the truth about God and man.

According to James, *all* the various theologies agree that the "something more" really does exist, and really acts. However:

"It is when they treat of the experience of 'union' with it that their speculative differences appear most clearly. Over this point pantheism and theism, nature and second birth, works and grace and karma, immortality and reincarnation, rationalism and mysticism, carry on inveterate dispute." (456)

Indeed there is *dispute*. Radical dispute! When James lumps all religions together, as he often does, he is dead wrong. The believer is united with Christ in a significant way (Romans 6:1-14), and he has the indwelling Holy Spirit. But *never* does man become equal to God, *never* does man become God, *never* is the Creator-creature distinction erased!

**Pantheism and Monism.** Having blurred the crucial distinction between God and man, it is no wonder that James moves right on into pantheism, or monism. James teaches that there are two key philosophical directions in which mysticism takes us: *optimism*

and *monism*. Optimism should be questioned, but *monism* is surely there:

"We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest. We feel them as reconciling, unifying states." (375)

James notes that "philosophic theism has always shown a tendency to become pantheistic and monistic" (124). However, this poses the problem--again!--of reconciling evil with God:

"But on the monistic or pantheistic view, evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God; and the difficulty is to see how this can possibly be the case if God be absolutely good." (125)

Carl Jung is one modern writer who proposes that *both* good and evil exist within God. The results are blasphemous and abhorrent to Christians! James has no answers, having wiped out (in his mind!) the clear distinction between God and man.

Sadly, James equates the pantheism of the "mind-cure" movement with Christianity:

"Its doctrine of the oneness of our life with God's life is in fact quite indistinguishable from an interpretation of Christ's message which in these very Gifford lectures has been defended by some of your very ablest Scottish religious philosophers." (102)

James has mutilated the teachings of our Lord here. Pantheism is a contradiction of the message of Christ as revealed in Scripture!

**Polytheism: a pantheon of idols!** In addition to identifying God and man, James clearly leaves the impression that different "gods" are acceptable for different people:

"If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions.... So a 'god of battles' must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another." (437)

James even tells us what sort of "god" science might recognize:

"The God whom science recognizes must be a God of universal laws exclusively...He cannot accommodate his processes to the convenience of individuals." (441)

Note the conflict with his earlier statements that man creates his own "gods" according to their usefulness!

Again relating science to religion, James says that:

"A good hypothesis in science must have other properties than those of the phenomenon it is immediately invoked to explain." (462)

By this definition, James judges that God does not qualify as a scientific hypothesis:

"He [God] needs to enter into wider cosmic relations in order to justify the subject's absolute confidence and peace." (462)

This is a highly presumptuous statement, considering that the God of Scripture is the *Creator* of the heavens and earth! He hardly needs to "enter into wider cosmic relations," since He created and sovereignly controls all things!

Between monism, polytheism, and "union" with divinity, James leaves his readers in a state of utter confusion concerning the identity of God. But it gets even worse!

### **God as the "Subconscious"**

James believes that the most important recent psychological "discovery" of his time period to be that:

"There is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field...but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether." (215)

The manifestations of religious life, according to James, "frequently connect themselves with the subconscious part of our existence" (428). He clearly connects "religious experience" with the "subconscious," saying that:

"This discovery of a consciousness existing beyond the field, or subliminally...casts light on many phenomena of religious biography." (215)

Explaining further, James believes that there may be from the subconscious "incursions...of which the subject does not guess the

source," including "inhibitions of action...obsessive ideas...hallucinations of sight or hearing." The name "automatism" is given "to this whole sphere of effects, due to 'uprushes' into the ordinary consciousness of energies originating in the subliminal parts of the mind" (216).

James calls conversion a "psychological peculiarity" rather than a divine miracle (218). He says that the subjects of sudden conversions are persons "who are in possession of a large region in which mental work can go on subliminally" (219). He mentions Professor Coe, another writer in the "psychology of religion" school. Coe's analysis of 77 conversions shows results that "confirm the view that sudden conversion is connection with the possession of an active subliminal self" (221).

Clearly, James attempts to "explain" the salvation experience through psychological theories and terms. He even goes so far as to compare salvation and sanctification experiences with hypnosis, an unbiblical practice:

"It is difficult not to believe that subliminal influences play the decisive part in these abrupt changes of heart, just as they do in hypnotism." (247)

According to James, God's grace--*if* it exists--may operate in some mysterious fashion through subliminal processes:

"If the grace of God miraculously operates, it probably operates through the subliminal door, then. But just *how* anything operates in this region is still unexplained." (248)

But how do such "explanations" square with the question of God's actual existence? Are his speculations about the "subconscious" consistent with the God of Scripture?

"If you, being orthodox Christians, ask me as a psychologist whether the reference of a phenomenon to a subliminal self does not exclude the notion of the direct presence of the Deity altogether, I have to say frankly that as a psychologist I do not see why it necessarily should.... It is logically conceivable that *if there be* higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so *might be* our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them." (223)

So perhaps God exists, but has access primarily through the "subconscious" region? This blatantly contradicts Scripture! God's existence is *definite*, not merely tentative or probable. He



speaks directly to man's *conscious* mind through His revelation in the Bible, not mysteriously through some "subconscious" realm.

James cannot separate his proposed "subliminal" conversion experience from *insanity*:

"In delusional insanity...we may have a *diabolical* mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down.... The classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known." (384)

Such a view is conveniently consistent with the teachings of Freud, Ellis, and other atheists that religious faith is actually a sign of mental disorder! Believers must beware of such deceptions.

**"Automatisms."** We noted earlier that James uses the term "automatism" to describe activities carried on in the "subconscious" realm of the mind. He says that:

"You will in point of fact hardly find a religious leader of any kind in whose life there is no record of automatisms." (428)

Also present is "exalted sensibility" (428). But beware, because:

"Beliefs are strengthened wherever automatisms corroborate them." (428)

Thus James has a neatly conceived psychological explanation for the strength of religious convictions. *Christians*, however, attribute the strength of their faith to the power of *God*, not an elusive, imaginary "subconscious" area of their own minds!

**Revelation.** Citing the Old Testament Hebrew prophets as an example, James uses the term "inspiration" for that "sense of being the instrument of a higher power" (429). He cites the revelations of Mohammed, also, as arising out of the subconscious (431). He makes similar claims for Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, and the revelations of Fox in spiritist circles (432). As if all "revelation" could be lumped together, without distinguishing between truth and lies!

**God as the "subconscious."** Probably the most grievous lie in his entire writing is James' equation of God with the "subconscious," or a "higher self." As he moves into a consideration of whether there is "higher power" in the "subconscious," he begins by "using less particularized terms."

Yet he moves naturally to the terms of his own faith system, psychology:

"The *subconscious self* is nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity; and I believe that in it we have exactly the mediating term required. Apart from all religious considerations, there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of." (457)

He moves toward his diabolical equation of God and the "subconscious" by citing his previous connections:

"In our study of conversion, of mystical experiences, and of prayer, we have seen how striking a part invasions from this region [the subconscious] play in the religious life." (457)

The religious connection with "something more," according to James is "the subconscious continuation of our conscious life." Furthermore:

"It is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as 'higher,' but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true.... This doorway into the subject seems to me the best one for a science of religions, for it mediates between a number of different points of view." (458)

What about *truth*? James concludes that:

"We have in *the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*, a positive content of religious experience which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes.*" (460)

In addition, James believes that "the further limits of our being plunge...into an altogether other dimension of existence" which he calls "the supernatural region," and "our ideal impulses originate in this region." This "unseen world" is one which "produces effect in this world" (460).

All of this leads to a simple yet critical conclusion: James is at heart an *atheist* who uses the theories and terminology of modern psychology to "explain" away the truth of Christian theism.

His teachings do nothing to disrupt the false faiths of the world. But despite his claims to merely observe and describe, to impartially and respectfully study *all* religions, James cannot keep his promise of neutrality. From the outset, he rules out the truth of Christianity. His deception comes to a climax here in his equation of "God" with the human "subconscious"!

## Salvation

James devotes significant space to the experience of religious conversion, which he defines, in general terms, as follows:

"To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring about a moral change or not."  
(177)

Another key element is the presence of religious ideas, which following "conversion" hold a prominent place in a man's life:

"To say that a man is 'converted' means...that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy." (183)

Being "saved," for James, is seen in terms of New Age pantheism, where self is "god":

"When we touch our own upper limit and live in our own highest center of energy, we may call ourselves saved."  
(220)

Such definitions *rule out* the genuine salvation experience of the Christian. *God* initiates salvation by His sovereign pleasure and power (Ephesians 1). It has nothing to do with some "higher center of energy" within *man*, as James proposes! It is improper to lump together all religious "conversions" and assume that Christianity is properly included as simply another example.

**What is the process of conversion?** James admits the failure of his profession to adequately account for conversion. He says that:

"If you ask of psychology just *how* the excitement shifts in a man's mental system, and *why* aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central...she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work."  
(183)

It isn't surprising to learn that James particularly sees *subconscious* forces at work in bringing about conversion. He describes some of the factors involved in the conversion process, including new information and a gradual change of instincts. He believes that "all these influences may work subconsciously or half unconsciously" (184). He describes conversion as "subconscious maturity processes eventuating in results of which we suddenly grow conscious" (192).

The factor of *sin* is brought into the picture, although sin is never defined by biblical standards, but rather as a vague sense of being "incomplete":

"There are two things in the mind of the candidate for conversion: first, the present incompleteness or wrongness, the 'sin' which he is eager to escape from; and second, the positive ideal which he longs to compass.... In a majority of cases, indeed, the 'sin' almost exclusively engrosses the attention, so that conversion is '*a process of struggling away from sin rather than of striving towards righteousness.*'" (194)

James also proposes that there is a "conversion type" of person who, when exposed to some "converting influence," is bound to be converted. He lists the following characteristics of this "conversion type": (1) strong emotional sensibility, (2) the tendency to "automatisms," and (3) passive suggestibility (222). Note the emphasis on emotions and the "subliminal," rather than any intellectual processes *or the real power of God!*

In contrast to the "conversion type," there are also, according to James, persons who can *never* be converted:

"Some persons...never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted. Religious ideas cannot become the center of their spiritual energy.... They are either incapable of imagining the invisible, or else, in the language of devotion, they are life-long subjects of 'barrenness' and 'dryness.' Such inaptitude for religious faith may in some cases be intellectual in origin." (190)

James not only explains conversion psychologically. He also explains the *failure* to convert!

What about the actual power behind a conversion experience? When he discusses sudden conversions, James says that:

"Theology, combining this fact [the experience of sudden conversion] with the doctrines of election and grace, has concluded that the spirit of God is with us at these dramatic moments in a peculiarly miraculous way, unlike what happens at any other juncture of our lives. At that moment, it believes, an absolutely new nature is breathed into us, and we become partakers of the very substance of the Deity."  
(210)

Never do we become partakers of the very *substance* of Deity! James refuses to acknowledge the *reality* of the true God, insisting rather that there is merely a *feeling* of miraculous power:

"It is natural that those who personally have traversed such an experience should carry away a feeling of its being a miracle rather than a natural process." (211)

It is critical that we document here a key admission that psychology is opposed to Christianity on the matter of conversion. James sees psychology and Christianity in harmony *to a certain point*, but then radically divergent. In discussing "self-surrender" as a major turning point in religious life, James says this:

"Psychology and religion are thus in perfect harmony up to this point, since both admit that there are forces seemingly outside of the conscious individual that bring redemption to his life." (196)

Then James acknowledges the *radical* difference. Psychology finds roots in the human subconscious, which "implies that they do not transcend the individual's personality; and *herein she diverges from Christian theology*, which insists that they are direct supernatural operations of the Deity" (196, emphasis added!). For psychology--at least for James--*the human "subconscious" is God!* Note this carefully. Although James may appear more "open" to religious faith than militant atheists like Freud and Ellis, the "religion" he makes room for is one in which self ascends to the throne of God! This was Satan's error--the reason for his fall from heaven.

**Two types of conversion: "volitional" and "self-surrender".** James divided "conversion" into these two "types." The former he describes as more of a gradual transition:

"In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits." (192)

"Self-surrender" is the key element in the second "type." In this area James is certainly a forerunner of the popular 12-step movement, which begins with an admission of being "powerless." James says that:

"Self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning point of the religious life, so far as the religious life is spiritual and no affair of outer works and ritual and sacraments." (196)

This is a subtle distortion of the Christian doctrine of salvation by *faith* rather than works.

However, when James considers the "psychology of self-surrender," he believes that it would seem absurd to a despairing person (196). He insists that "both conditions--subconscious ripening of one affection [religious] and exhaustion of the other--must simultaneously have conspired, in order to produce the result [surrender]" (199). Despair of one's own efforts can thus lead to surrender and then to "religious" experience.

James also connects "surrender" with the suspension of morality. He believes that, for some people:

"A change of character for the better, so far from being facilitated by the rules laid down by official moralists, will take place all the more successfully if those rules be exactly reversed." (105)

Such "reversal," he claims, consists of a "surrender," an "anti-moralistic" passivity, the "salvation through self-despair" of Lutheran theology. It is confusing and unbiblical, however, to connect a Christian denomination with a denial of God's law. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, and not by human works. However, God's law is never "reversed"! It continues to be righteous, pure, and good, guiding the lives of believers.

**Sudden conversions.** In addition to differentiating between "volitional" and "self-surrender" conversions, James devotes considerable space to conversions that occur suddenly:

"Beyond all question there are persons in whom, quite independently of any exhaustion in the subject's capacity for feeling, or even in the absence of any acute previous feeling, the higher condition, having reached the due degree of energy, bursts through all barriers and sweeps in like a sudden flood." (200)

Sadly, James attributes these "miraculous" conversions to the individual's *subconscious* rather than to the Holy Spirit, and he fails to distinguish genuine salvation from "conversion" to false religions.

James notes that a personal crisis may very well precede a sudden conversion. In fact, some people believe such a crisis to be a necessity:

"For Methodism...unless there has been a crisis of this sort, salvation is only offered, not effectively received, and Christ's sacrifice in so far forth is incomplete. Methodism surely here follows, if not the healthier-minded, yet on the whole the profounder spiritual instinct." (211)

James also cites Jonathan Edwards as showing:

"...that such a glorious transformation as this ought of necessity to be preceded by despair. Edwards emphasizes the sense of evil from which God delivers us." (212)

What about the *real* presence and power of God? James asks:

"Is an instantaneous conversion a miracle in which God is present as He is present in no change of heart less strikingly abrupt?" (213)

His answer reflects the grievous error in his thinking, as he suggests that "the whole phenomenon of regeneration" may "possibly be a strictly natural process" although "divine in its fruits" (213). Explaining his heresy even further, James says:

"If, abstracting altogether from the question of their value for the future spiritual life of the individual, we take them on their psychological side exclusively, so many peculiarities in them remind us of what we find outside of conversion that we are tempted to class them along with other automatisms, and to suspect that what makes the difference between a sudden and a gradual convert is not necessarily the present of divine miracle...but rather a simple psychological peculiarity." (218)

As believers, we must utterly reject such psychological explanations of God's power in the process of salvation! Receiving Christ as Lord and Savior is not a "simple psychological peculiarity"! This is offensive and blasphemous.

**The need for salvation.** In the theology of James, the sinfulness of man is wiped out so that the *need* to be saved takes on a wholly different character. James claims to find support for his thesis in the writings of the apostle Paul:

"St. Paul long ago made our ancestors familiar with the idea that every soul is virtually sacred.... This belief in the essential sacredness of every one expresses itself today in all sorts of humane customs and reformatory institutions, and in a growing aversion to the death penalty and to brutality in punishment." (325)

James cites no actual Scripture, however, and he ignores a vast number of Pauline passages about the gravity of sin! Paul never taught the "sacredness" of every soul.

James *does* find support in the modern, unbiblical "mind-cure" movement, which admittedly borrows Christian terms and radically alters the meaning:

"Although the disciples of the mind-cure often use Christian terminology, one sees...how widely their notion of the fall of man diverges from that of ordinary Christians. Their notion of man's higher nature is hardly less divergent, being decidedly pantheistic." (96)

But in a system of pantheism, where the fall of man is obliterated, there is no *need* for salvation from sin! In fact, man is *already divine* in such a blasphemous theological system:

"The spiritual in man appears in the mind-cure philosophy as partly conscious, but chiefly subconscious; and through the subconscious part of it we are already one with the Divine without any miracle of grace, or abrupt creation of a new inner man." (97)

James states that we find in this view traces of "Christian mysticism, of transcendental idealism, of vedantism, and of the *modern psychology of the subliminal self*" (97, emphasis added). Note the connection between *modern psychology* and the belief that man is *divine*! But James makes another connection, one that defies comprehension because it is so absurd:



"On the whole, one is struck by a psychological similarity between the mind-cure movement and the Lutheran and Wesleyan movements." (103)

He equates the mind-cure view of the power of *thoughts* with the *belief* that you have been saved. This is an incredible distortion of real Christianity!

James goes on to describe the healing processes of the "mind-cure" in terms of the affirmations we find today in the faith movement and in New Age theology:

"*God is well, and so are you. You must awaken to the knowledge of your real being.*" (104)

It is revolting to see how James wants to equate the "mind-cure" movement's denial of sin with the Lutheran and Wesleyan traditions, which clearly *do not deny sin*:

"The mind-curiers...have demonstrated that a form of regeneration by relaxing, by letting go, psychologically indistinguishable from the Lutheran justification by faith and the Wesleyan acceptance of free grace, is within the reach of persons who have no conviction of sin and care nothing for the Lutheran theology." (106)

Such "abandonment" efforts, according to James, achieve similar results "no matter whether we adopt a theistic, a pantheistic-idealistic, or a medical-materialistic view of their ultimate causal explanation" (106). The *eternal results*, however, are anything but similar!

James again rejects the biblical doctrine of sin when he says that:

"Protestantism has been too pessimistic as regards the natural man, Catholicism has been too legalistic and moralistic." (109)

James doesn't want to be burdened with the apparent philosophical difficulties of admitting our inherently sinful nature:

"If we admit that evil is an essential part of our being and the key to the interpretation of life, we load ourselves down with a difficulty that has always proved burdensome in philosophies of religion." (124)

His substitute is a teaching about the "divided self," which we will be looking at more closely. When discusses the unhappiness

of the "sick soul," he equates it with the Christian's conviction of sin:

"The man's interior is a battleground for what he feels to be two deadly hostile selves, one actual, the other ideal."  
(159)

The Apostle Paul, particularly in Romans 7, is cited as one example of this "self loathing...self-despair...an unintelligible and intolerable burden to which one is mysteriously the heir" (159). A further example is found in the life and conversion of Augustine, who is quoted extensively by James (159). James contrasts the "higher wishes" with the "lower tendencies" in his description of the so-called "divided self" (161). But he finds no genuine support in Scripture for such a view. God's Word teaches the total depravity of man, apart from divine intervention. Man must be regenerated by the power of God. He is separated from God by his sin, not separated from a "higher self" by some inner struggle.

Yet oddly enough, James quotes another *unbeliever*, who also writes about the "psychology of religion," as recognizing the factor of sin in religious life:

"Professor Leuba...subordinates the theological aspect of the religious life almost entirely to its moral aspect.... 'The word "religion"...is getting more and more to signify the conglomerate of desires and emotions springing from the sense of sin and its release.'" (187)

This leads naturally to a consideration of repentance. James cites Spinoza's philosophy as one of "healthy-mindedness":

"He whom Reason leads, according to Spinoza, is led altogether by the influence over his mind of good. Knowledge of evil is an 'inadequate' knowledge, fit only for slavish minds. So Spinoza categorically condemns repentance." (121)

James believes that "healthy-minded" Christians are those for whom repentance means "*getting away from the sin*, not groaning and writhing over its commission" (122). He cites favorably the Catholic practices of confession and absolution, wherein one may periodically "start the clean page with no old debts inscribed.... Any Catholic will tell us how clean and fresh and free he feels after the purging operation" (122).

James clearly lacks understanding of biblical repentance. It is *Christ* who washes away sin so that the believer has a "clean page." Believers don't "groan and writhe" over their past sins,

because their Lord has cleansed them. However, they do *repent* and believe in Him, as Scripture commands.

**Unification of the "divided self."** As we have just seen, the need for conversion takes on an entirely different character for James. Biblically, man's sin separates him from God and he needs to be reconciled to God, which happens only by the blood of Christ. James, however, sees a separation *within self*. Self thus needs to be *unified*, and for James, this may occur with or without any specific religion.

Following Starbuck, James believes that the "imperfect self" is at work when the personal will is exercised, while the "better self" is in charge when subconscious forces are operating (195). He speaks of the "divided self" as a "heterogeneous personality," of which the most extreme types are of a psychopathic temperament (158).

The process of unifying the "divided self," according to James, is one which:

"...may come gradually, or it may occur abruptly; it may come through altered feelings, or through altered powers of action; or it may come through new intellectual insights, or through experiences which we shall later have to designate as 'mystical.'" (163)

James cuts God completely out of the process:

"But to find religion is only one out of many ways of reaching unity; and the process of remedying inner incompleteness and reducing inner discord is a general psychological process, which may take place with any sort of mental material, and need not necessarily assume the religious form." (163)

James proposes that:

"The religious types of regeneration...are only one species of a genus that contains other types as well." (163)

He claims that:

"The new birth may be away from religion into incredulity, or it may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and license." (163)

These are incredibly anti-Christian claims! James believes that religious regeneration, and these other "regenerations"... "have precisely the same psychological form of event--a firmness,

stability, and equilibrium succeeding a period of storm and stress and inconsistency" (163). As an example, James cites the French philosopher Jouffroy, who describes "his own 'counter-conversion' as the transition from orthodoxy to infidelity" (164).

Contradictory to all of his emphasis on the "fruits" of religious experience, James expresses a total lack of concern for whether "conversion" leads to morality or to *immorality*. Rather:

"The fact of interest for us is that as a matter of fact they could and did find *something* welling up in the inner reaches of their consciousness, by which such extreme sadness could be overcome." (174-175)

To James, the content of that "something" is irrelevant, but the believer knows that this "something" has eternal consequences! Clearly, we cannot follow James on his view of the "divided self" which needs to be "unified."

**"Healthy-minded" religion.** As he delves into his definition of "healthy-minded" religion, James first addresses the issue of human happiness:

"If we were to ask the question: 'What is human life's chief concern?' one of the answers we should receive would be: 'It is happiness.'" (77)

James sees an intimate relationship between religion and happiness, such that "men come to regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as a proof of its truth" (77). James believes that many who experience happiness in their religion, refusing to feel unhappy, have a religion which is "one of union with the divine" (78). There are those, he says, "who can think no ill of man or God, and in whom religious gladness, being in possession from the outset, needs no deliverance from any antecedent burden" (79). James suggests that we give the name "healthy-minded" to "the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good" (85). *Again*, we find a total reversal of the biblical view of man's need for redemption!

**Liberalism.** James observes that Roman Catholicism provides a "more congenial soil" to "healthy-minded" religion than does the Protestant faith (80). However, he finds in Unitarianism, Emerson, and modern Protestant liberalism examples of "healthy-minded" religion (80), denying the realities of both sin and God's eternal judgment:

"The advance of liberalism, so-called, in Christianity, during the past fifty years, may fairly be called a victory of healthy-mindedness within the church over the morbidness

with which the old hell-fire theology was more harmoniously related. We have now whole congregations whose preachers, far from magnifying our consciousness of sin, seem devoted rather to making little of it. They ignore, or even deny, eternal punishment, and insist on the dignity rather than on the depravity of man. They look at the continual preoccupation of the old-fashioned Christian with the salvation of his soul as something sickly and reprehensible rather than admirable; and a sanguine and 'muscular' attitude, which to our forefathers would have seemed purely heathen, has become in their eyes an ideal element of Christian character." (88)

James claims he is not judging this situation, however:

"I am not asking whether or not they are right, I am only pointing out the change." (88)

He observes that liberals have maintained a "nominal connection with Christianity, in spite of their discarding of its more pessimistic theological elements" (88).

Liberalism has indeed *broken* with real Christian faith. It is *another* gospel, one that is particularly dangerous in that it uses traditional terms *with new meanings of its own*. This is well documented by J. Gresham Machen, founder of Westminster Theological Seminary, in his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

**Evolution.** Here James finds additional traces of his so-called "healthy-mindedness." He believes that the theory of evolution has laid the ground for "a new sort of religion of Nature, which has entirely displaced Christianity" for many people (89). James finds evolution to be associated with human *progress*, interpreted optimistically by many and "embraced as a substitute for the religion they were born in" (89). People were "inwardly dissatisfied with what seemed to them the harshness and irrationality of the orthodox Christian scheme" (89).

Unregenerate people have always been, and always will be, "dissatisfied" with "the orthodox Christian scheme." They hold down the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18), however. *Believers* do not find "the orthodox Christian scheme" to be either "harsh" or "irrational." Rather, God is gracious and merciful, not counting men's sins against them because He has, in His love, sent Christ to satisfy His justice and secure salvation for His people.

Evolution conflicts with Christianity on many points, and there is no space to critique it fully. However, note that it actually *degrades* man by viewing him as a highly evolved animal

rather than a being created directly by God's hand in His image (Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7). There is no progress or optimism in this view, but rather an extreme pessimism.

**"Mind-cure."** James mentions the "mind-cure" movement and "New Thought" as advocating an optimistic approach to life (91), thus an example of "healthy-minded" religion. Such theology is found in Christian Science, theosophy, the Unity Church, and the New Age movement generally. Sources for "mind-cure" religion include, according to James, *the four Gospels*, Emersonianism, Berkeleyan idealism, evolution, and Hinduism (91, emphasis). (The four Gospels must be grossly distorted to fit into this list!)

"Mind-cure" proponents place a heavy emphasis on positive attitudes and thinking:

"The leaders in this faith have had an intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes as such."  
(91)

The methods of the mind-curiers, James says, are suggestive in nature. Meanwhile, "the ideas of Christian churches are not efficacious in the therapeutic direction today." As far as providing healing, James insists "that the popular Christianity does absolutely *nothing*, or did nothing until mind-cure came to the rescue" (107). He goes on to claim that *man's thoughts, rather than God, control reality*:

"That the controlling energies of nature are personal, that your own personal thoughts are forces, that the powers of the universe will directly respond to your individual appeals and needs, are propositions which your whole bodily and mental experience will verify." (113-114)

He gives credit to "mind-cure" for making use of subconscious healing processes. According to James, "mind-cure has made what in our Protestant countries is an unprecedentedly great use of the subconscious life" with techniques such as passive relaxation exercises, concentration, meditation, and hypnosis (109). In all of this, it is *man*, not *God*, who is made the author and finisher of our faith. Man must save himself by his thoughts and "subconscious" processes. This is antithetical to the true gospel message of Jesus Christ!

The "mind-cure" movement also makes the claim that the "mark of the beast" in Christian theology is *fear* (94). But this is a diabolical distortion of what the Scriptures actually teach the believer (John 14:1; 2 Timothy 1:7).

James believes that "the spread of the movement [mind-cure] has been due to practical fruits" (92). We are once again faced with his pragmatism, which *ignores truth*. It also ignores the fruit of God's Spirit in the Christian (Galatians 5:17-22).

**The "once-born" and "twice-born."** Citing Francis W. Newman, James speaks of God's "two families" on earth, the "once-born" and the "twice-born." The "once-born" person does not see God as a strict Judge or as severe, and knows little of human sin (79). Thus it is this "once-born" individual that James calls "healthy-minded." This person is one who, according to James, "needs to be born only once," while the "sick soul" "must be twice-born in order to be happy" (155). James sees a striking contrast when "once-born" and "twice-born" are taken to their respective extremes:

"In their extreme forms, of pure naturalism and pure salvationism, the two types are violently contrasted." (155)

This is a radical denial of biblical teachings about salvation! According to God's Word, man is by nature spiritually dead in sins (Ephesians 2) and in need of being born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. "Once-born" is *never* sufficient for salvation.

James uses the term "twice born" to apply to Brahmans, Buddhists, Christians, and Mohammedans, lumping *all* religions together as equal (134). In contrast to the blissfully ignorant "once-born," these persons have been driven to the pit of despair:

"The securest way to the rapturous sorts of happiness of which the twice-born make report has as an historic matter of fact been through a more radical pessimism than anything that we have yet considered." (134)

After James describes and quotes Bunyan and Tolstoy as examples of the "twice-born" variety, he claims that:

"Neither...could become what we have called healthy-minded. They had drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste, and their redemption is into a universe two stories deep." (174)

Having described several other experiences of extreme despair followed by religious rapture, James says that:

"The process is one of redemption, not of mere reversion to natural health, and the sufferer, when saved, is saved by what seems to him a second birth, a deeper kind of conscious being than he could enjoy before." (146)

But this process of "redemption" must not be confused with the real redemption purchased for believers by Christ with His own blood (Ephesians 1:7)! Nor is it the "born again" experience of the Christian.

When he discusses evil, James concludes that the most "complete" religions are those where the "pessimistic elements are best developed," namely Buddhism and Christianity:

"These are essentially religions of deliverance: the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life." (154)

This James calls the "second birth," but it's *not* the born-again experience of Christianity! It's nauseating to see James equate Buddhism, a philosophy of *atheism*, with Christianity--in any sense!

All of this talk of "once-born" and "twice-born" is a confusing distortion of Christian terms and concepts which has nothing to do with the true process of regeneration.

**Fruits of conversion.** James' pragmatic approach surfaces again. This time, he begins with a denial of such fruits:

"Converted men as a class are indistinguishable from natural men; some natural men even excel some converted men in their fruits.... The believers in the non-natural character of sudden conversion have had to practically to admit that there is no unmistakable class-mark distinctive of all true converts." (220)

Thus James effectively denies Christian *sanctification* in addition to his denial of *salvation*. But in line with many modern psychologists, he zeroes in on man's feelings. One key emotion associated with conversion is peace, the loss of all worry:

"The certainty of God's 'grace,' of 'justification,' 'salvation,' is an objective belief that usually accompanies the change in Christians; but this may be entirely lacking and yet the affective peace remain the same." (228)

Another result of conversion is the perception of truths that were previously unknown (228). There is also "the objective change which the world often appears to undergo," a "beautiful newness within and without" (228).

Visual hallucinations are thrown in the bag with peace, joy, and other emotions associated with conversion. James refers to one



"automatism" as "hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory luminous phenomena," insisting that "Saint Paul's blinding heavenly vision seems to have been a phenomena of this sort" (231). Thus James dismisses an actual appearance of our Lord as a mere hallucination!

Ecstatic happiness is the final emotion that James associates with conversion (233). But he quickly dismisses the genuine joy of the Christian, saying that our Lord's work on the cross is irrelevant:

"Professor Leuba is undoubtedly right in contending that the conceptual belief about Christ's work, although so often efficacious and antecedent, is really accessory and non-essential, and that the 'joyous conviction' can also come by far other channels than this conception." (227)

It is not at all difficult to conclude that modern psychology's attempt to "explain" the conversion of *the Christian* is a diabolical, even blasphemous, mutilation of biblical truth.

## **Sanctification**

The "converted" individual demonstrates a "new level of spiritual vitality" wherein "the personality is changed, the man *is born anew*," and according to James, "'sanctification' is the technical name of this result" (222). We must compare what James says about sanctification, or "saintliness" as he calls it, with the truth of God's Word.

James wants to consider the "practical fruits for life" of religious conversions. He began his inquiry in order "to attain a spiritual judgment as to the total value and positive meaning of all the religious trouble and happiness which we have seen" (239). He affirms that "the best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show" (239). Nevertheless, when he considers those who demonstrate the fruits of religious life, James says that "judging them by worldly law, we might be tempted to call them monstrous aberrations from the path of nature" (240). James wants to explore what it is, *psychologically* (not *spiritually!*), that differentiates one human character from another (240). And there is indeed a difference acknowledged by James:

"The man who lives in his religious center of personal energy, and is actuated by spiritual enthusiasms, differs from his previous carnal self in perfectly definite ways." (245)

**Inhibitions and impulses.** Here is one area where a difference arises, says James. He teaches that:

"Our moral and practical attitude, at any given time, is always a result of two sets of forces [inhibitions and impulses] within." (240)

When a person's controlling emotions are religious, according to James, the result is that inhibitions fall away. The result is similar when other emotions, such as love, anger, or enthusiasm, are at a high level (245).

**Temptations.** This is another difference that James observes. He notes that it has been well documented "that lower temptations may remain completely annulled, apart from transient emotion and as if by alteration of the man's habitual nature" (246).

**Features of "saintliness."** James provides us with his general definition of "saintliness," one that transcends differences in religious creed:

"The collective name for the ripe fruits of religion in a character is saintliness. The saintly character is the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual center of the personal energy, and there is a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions, of which the features can easily be traced." (249)

James believes it is possible to develop individual qualities of "saintliness" without religion at all, yet when taken as a whole these characteristics are intimately related to religion:

"Single attributes of saintliness may, it is true, be temperamental endowments, found in non-religious individuals. But the whole group of them forms a combination which, as such, is religious, for it seems to flow from the sense of the divine as from its psychological center." (334)

The first feature of "saintliness" is "a feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests, and a conviction...of the existence of an Ideal Power" (249). Second is "a willing self-surrender to its control" (250). Third is "a shifting of the emotional center toward loving and harmonious affections" (250).

The practical consequences of the above "inner conditions" include asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity (251). "Strength of soul" is described as a state wherein "personal motives and inhibitions...become too insignificant for notice"

(251). James describes purity as "the cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements" (251). He describes the "saintly person" as "sensitive to inner inconsistency or discord":

"Mixed with this exaltation of the moral sensibilities there is also an ardor of sacrifice, for the beloved deity's sake, of everything unworthy of him." (266)

Charity, he says, is a general tenderness for others that includes love for one's enemies (251), *in any religious creed*. In fact, James asks:

"Can there in general be a level of emotion so unifying, so oblitative of differences between man and man, that even enmity may come to be an irrelevant circumstance and fail to inhibit the friendlier interests aroused?" (260)

James answers yes. It is the emotion of loving one's enemies:

"Psychologically and in principle, the precept 'Love your enemies' is not self-contradictory...if radically followed, it would involve such a breach with our instinctive springs of action as a whole, and with the present world's arrangements, that a critical point would practically be passed, we should be born into another kingdom of being. Religious emotion makes us feel that other kingdom to be close at hand, within our reach." (260)

However, we are only able to truly love because God first loved us. The unbeliever *cannot* love his enemy. James offers a counterfeit that lines up perfectly with the New Age movement's agenda.

In addition to the various characteristics of "saintliness" just listed, James also includes "a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life," and "an assurance of safety...peace" (435). But it is a *false* safety indeed, one that has no view for *eternity* with God.

**Withdrawal and asceticism.** James observes that "saintliness" may involve a withdrawal from the world:

"When the craving for moral consistency and purity is developed to this degree, the subject may well find the outer world too full of shocks to dwell in, and can unify his life and keep his soul unspotted only by withdrawing from it." (271)

An ascetic lifestyle will most likely accompany such withdrawal. James claims that "the adjective 'ascetic' is applied to conduct

originating on diverse psychological levels" (273). These include: organic hardship, love of purity, "sacrifices...to the Deity whom he acknowledges," pessimistic views of self along with theological beliefs about expiation, obsessions (in psychopathic persons), and "genuine perversions of the bodily sensibility" (273). James offers a psychological explanation for religious asceticism. When a those who have a strong need for tension and strong volition becomes religious:

"They are apt to turn the edge of their need of effort and negativity against their natural self, and the ascetic life gets evolved as a consequence." (274)

James describes a "strange moral transformation" in our age, in that "we no longer think that we are called on to face physical pain with equanimity" (274). In our society today:

"Any deliberate tendency to pursue the hard and painful as such and for their own sakes might well strike one as purely abnormal." (273)

However, even though asceticism, in general, is considered pathological, James states that:

"In its spiritual meaning asceticism stands for nothing less than for the essence of the twice-born philosophy." (329)

This is explained in the fact that asceticism does not ignore or evade the real wrong that exists in the world, but rather it is "neutralized and cleansed away by suffering" (329). However, the necessity for ascetic practice is not without serious question:

"If the inner dispositions are right, we ask, what need of all this torment, this violation of the outer nature?" (327)

James cites the Bhagavad-Gita (327), then Augustine, Ramakrishna, and Buddha, for support of the question he poses (328).

Biblically, asceticism for the sake of "cleansing" is improper. Jesus Christ provides cleansing for sin through His blood. Believers are to exercise proper self-control over their bodies, using them to glorify God. They may be called on to suffer or even to be martyred for their faith. However, bodily suffering as an end in itself is unbiblical.

**Obedience, chastity, and poverty.** James says that:

"In the ecclesiastically consecrated character three minor branches of self-mortification have been recognized as indispensable pathways to perfection." (284)

These are obedience, chastity, and poverty. James views obedience as another type of "ascetic sacrifice":

"Obedience may spring from the general religious phenomenon of inner softening and self-surrender and throwing one's self on higher powers. So saving are these attitudes felt to be that in themselves, apart from utility, they become ideally consecrated...add self-despair and the passion of self-crucifixion to this, and obedience becomes an ascetic sacrifice." (285)

But according to Scripture, the believer is to obey because he loves the Lord with his entire being. Jesus summarized the law in the two commands to love God and others. He said that whoever loves Him would keep His commandments.

Poverty, according to James, is idealized as a lofty state by Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, Jesuits, and Franciscans (291):

"In short, lives based on having are less free than lives based either on doing or on being, and in the interest of action people subject to spiritual excitement throw away possessions as so many clogs." (292)

James associates poverty with "that fundamental mystery of religious experience, the satisfaction found in absolute surrender to the larger power" (293). Explaining further, he says that "over and above the mystery of self-surrender, there are in the cult of poverty other religious mysteries," such as the sentiment that "naked I came into the world" (296). There is also the "equality before God of all his creatures" (296). However, poverty is currently an unpopular state of affairs:

"Among us English-speaking peoples especially do the praises of poverty need once more to be boldly sung. We have grown literally afraid to be poor. We despise any one who elects to be poor in order to simplify and save his inner life." (333)

Like asceticism, the "virtue" of poverty is misunderstood and misused. The believer is not to pursue material wealth for its own sake, neglecting the service of God. But neither is he to seek poverty *for its own sake*. The Christian lives to serve God, not self. If he happens to be entrusted with wealth, he has a responsibility to use it for the glory of God. The apostle Paul noted that he was able to be content in *either* prosperity or poverty. Over the centuries, there have been excesses in both directions, neither of which truly serves God.

## Conclusions

James believes that the message of "mind-cure" theology is one which might play a key role in the "evolution of the popular religion of the future" (104). Indeed it already *has* played such a role, in Protestant liberalism (which is *not* Christianity) and in a variety of New Age religions and practices. Our concern, however, is with biblical truth. James specifically disregards truth in his analysis of "religious experiences." God is equated with the human "subconscious" in his writing, and "conversion" is explained in psychological terms that rule out the possibility of divine intervention. All religions are lumped together and judged by pragmatic, humanistic standards that bypass God's revelation to man. The influence of William James emerges in the increasingly popular 12-step movement and in New Age quarters. But it is a dangerous influence rooted in anti-Christian presuppositions, and therefore we must *beware*.

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