

THE QUICKSAND OF CERTAINTY:
WILLIAM JAMES AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN THE GILDED
AGE

by

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Abstract

This thesis is centered on moral uncertainty in the Gilded Age, and the subsequent fin-de-siècle search for meaning in a world that seemed to be turned on its head in every way by economic, political, social, technological, and cultural change. Out of that historical context, my thesis focuses in particular on the religious writings of William James, arguing that his ideas about morality and belief were a direct response to this uncertainty. They represented an ethical realignment based on the full dimensions of human experience instead of any one traditional religious dogma. Many historians have failed to see that James was a significant figure in religious history; they have overlooked how he was representative of the transformation in ideas about religion during the period. I hope to fill in those blanks. Ultimately, this thesis will examine how American society navigated this era of tumultuous uncertainty, when the traditional framework of religious faith, confidence in social progress, and assumptions about social hierarchy were torn down and rebuilt along lines that accommodated critical intellectual developments. These transatlantic and transnational developments prefigure many of the issues that we grapple with today.

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To my father, Jack

Introduction: The Quicksand of Certainty

Sand is not a very good building material. It slips, it slides, it crumbles; and so do things built upon it. Many years and many miles removed from the time and place of this study, as told by Matthew in the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth spoke of the “wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock,” and of the “foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”¹ Jesus could just as easily have been speaking almost two thousand years later, to all those who felt trapped and sinking in the shifting sands of modernism at the turn of the nineteenth century. Modern society, Reverend Theodore Munger worriedly noted in 1887, “destroys the sense of reality . . . [and] envelops all things in its puzzle—God, immortality, the value of life, the rewards of virtue, and the operation of conscience. It puts quicksand under every step.”² In the period between the end of the American Civil War and the end of the First World War, men and women on both sides of the Atlantic felt the ground underneath them shaking violently, the former foundations of society disintegrating, threatening to cave in and swallow them whole.

The moment in time in which nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans lived seemed destined to make them lose their footing. The late

¹ Matthew 7:24-27, Revised Standard Version.

² Reverend Theodore T. Munger, qtd. in T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 42.

nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of great upheaval, of questioning, of tumultuous change in every area. In economics, capitalism created unimaginable riches, industrialization fashioned countries into economic powerhouses, and the rise of the corporation restructured business. At the same time, economic change created tremendous social dislocation as small businesses gave way to large consolidations, immigrant labourers endured dangerous working conditions, and skilled labourers lost the artisan independence that had defined the free labour ideal of the 19th century. Industrialization and urbanization further uprooted and dislocated society. Even more visibly, the technological revolution gave society a completely new face. The era saw the birth of the telephone, telegraph, steam engine, electricity, airplane, farming machinery, mass-produced consumer goods, even time zones—the list goes on and on.

It is no wonder that people felt disoriented. The world was spinning faster than ever before: “the dizzying pace of change had ushered in a ‘megaphonic’ age marked by constant movement and sensory stimulation.”³ In the concluding pages of *This Side of Paradise*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s college-age protagonist, Amory, captures the tail end of the era’s zeitgeist: “Modern life . . . changes no longer century by century, but year by year, ten times faster than it ever has before.”⁴ The world was in a fast-forward frenzy.

³ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p. 144.

⁴ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise: The Crack-Up, and Other Autobiographical Pieces* (London: Bodley Head, 1965), p. 261.

In Gilded Age America, this quasi-chaos equalled progress, while European countries were more likely to answer change with scepticism. America saw it as another chance at the country's time-honoured tradition of re-invention. By contrast, England witnessed the rise of the aesthetic movement, Germany began to explore the irrational and the unconscious, and France settled into ideas of ennui and primitivism. The United States, however, remained steadfast in its "almost spiritual belief in the creative possibilities of the individual and in science as forces that would conquer everything in their paths."⁵ These distinctly American qualities make the United States a fascinating case study when examining responses to modernity.

As the name itself implies, the Gilded Age appeared glittering on the surface, but it was tarnishing underneath. The era of America's coming of age and entry onto the world stage saw the end of the Frontier, the birth of robber barons, political corruption, acute poverty, labour unrest, softening religion, and hardening science. The political, economic, and social underbelly of the Gilded Age is easy to see and interesting in its own right.

What is less apparent on the surface, however, is just as interesting and perhaps more illuminating: the spiritual decay of the time. It took the form of a constant, pervading unease upsetting hearts and minds. Intellectual disorder and moral confusion lay beneath the Gilded Age's golden veneer of official optimism. This trouble with truth struck at the very heart of beliefs about religion, knowledge, and civilization itself. In a post-Darwinian age, even science, with all its claims to truth, began to provide only probabilities. How

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.

could one know anything anymore? People at the turn of the century greeted an uncertain world, the very definition of modern malaise.

The first part of this study will set the scene of uncertainty that animated the times. The second part will examine American philosopher William James's response to this uncertainty. At this point, it is perhaps helpful to provide a brief outline of James's life.⁶ James was born in New York in 1842, the eldest son of Mary Walsh James and Henry James Sr., a writer and a Swedenborgian theologian. He was also a brother to four other rambunctious siblings, including Henry James Jr., the future novelist. His family moved within New England intellectual circles, and his education was sporadic and non-traditional, including a number of extended stays in Europe and a brief sojourn in Rhode Island to study art with William Morris Hunt.⁷ He eventually settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1861 to study science at Harvard. He would end up spending his entire academic career there as a professor of physiology, then psychology, and finally philosophy, as well as marrying and raising a rambunctious, intellectual family of his own.

Photographs show James as a slim, wiry man with an equally wiry beard, well-kept and going grey by the 1890s.⁸ In professional portraits, he looks at the camera intensely but assuredly; in family snaps, his eyes are soft and kind; in pictures taken at his summer home in the Adirondack mountains, he is often

⁶ For a brief biography of James, see Linda Schott, "Jane Addams and William James on Alternatives to War," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (April 1993), p. 243.

⁷ See the chronology in Russell Goodman, "William James," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/james/>> (accessed 16 June 2014).

⁸ See the photograph sections included in Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006); see also the William James Papers (MS Am 1092.9-1092.12), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

intrepidly marching across the front lawn or perching on a stone wall, laughing with a colleague or family. In letters, James writes freely and floridly, never afraid of sounding foolish or adding a flourish.⁹ Although James suffered from a myriad of illnesses—eye strain, backaches, heart trouble, and at times severe depression—his letters and photographs reveal that he always had a zest for life and a hopefulness in his eyes.

James died in 1910, leaving a remarkable and influential legacy in psychology, philosophy, ethics, and religious studies. His life perfectly spans the Gilded Age and the first years of the twentieth century—he came of age during the Civil War, studied science at Harvard just after Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, wrote about psychology at the same time as Freud, and explored philosophy and religion just as biblical criticism and Pentecostalism emerged. James's generation straddled both worlds—from the Victorian world of the nineteenth century to the modern industrial capitalist one of the twentieth—making James's responses to modern uncertainty invaluable for historians.

Intellectuals and philosophers of James's day attempted to answer the simplest, most fundamental questions that haunted and eluded so many. William James succeeded where many failed. Through his studies of religion, the limits of scientific knowledge, the primacy of experience, free will, and choice, James found a way to continue to believe in belief in an uncertain world. If his era had shown him anything, it was that the world changes, and beliefs have to change

⁹ See especially his letters to his sister, Alice. Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, Vol. 2 (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920).

along with it. The important thing to him was that beliefs continue in some form, but not a constant one.

Even without certainty, he managed to paint a rich moral universe with a universal soul. History has often treated James as a kind grandfather figure, providing simple comfort to the sick souls of the Gilded Age.¹⁰ But the kind of religion he proposed, in reality, was designed to be much more revolutionary than therapeutic. James presented a vision of intellectual emancipation from the traditions of his own mainstream Christianity—a religious realignment based on the full spectrum of human experience, instead of one that simply propped up collapsing belief structures lost in quicksand. In a world increasingly removed from ‘real life,’ James believed there was a ‘real fight’ still to be fought. The world may have put on a new, unrecognizable, and frightening face, but you could still be brave about it.

William James in Historiography

Before situating William James in historical context, it is first necessary to situate him in scholastic context. Fittingly, the scholarly work on James is as interdisciplinary as the man himself. A quick look at the journal devoted to him, *William James Studies*, reveals articles on subjects as diverse as psychology, philosophy, and religious studies. Not only is Jamesian scholarship unorthodox in its range of disciplines, it is also unorthodox in the sense that it does not

¹⁰ See *William James in Historiography* section, pp. 6-12.

follow common historiographical patterns. Historians can track most topics chronologically, through eras of Marxist history, social history, and postmodernist history, among other approaches. Jamesian scholarship defies these conventions.

Most of the major studies on William James actually lie outside the realm of history, and when historians do devote time to him, they examine him straightforwardly, often from an intellectual or cultural history perspective, regardless of any historical trend in vogue at the time. Perhaps James is easily lumped into traditional, 'great men' history, even though he was anything but conventional. This historiography will reflect that unconventionality: organized by discipline instead of historical chronology, with little overlap between other historiographical movements, it will nevertheless provide a complete picture of James scholarship, and place this study of James within the spectrum.

To find a full-length book on William James, one must look to biography or philosophy instead of history. There are too many titles to name individually, but the following are a few representative examples. Unrivalled in sheer size and scope to this day, Ralph Barton Perry's 1948 book, *The Thought and Character of William James*, is a mammoth work incorporating both biography and philosophical analysis.¹¹ Another standout in the philosophic-biography category is Jacques Barzun's *A Stroll with William James*, a nostalgic and lovingly crafted ramble through James's ideas about religion, the mind,

¹¹ Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948).

freedom, and truth.¹² More recently, Robert D. Richardson's *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* presents James's life experiences, highlighting how they fundamentally shaped his philosophy.¹³

In philosophy, William James is a lovingly-explored and favorite subject. James's pragmatism, mysticism, anti-determinism, and moral universe fill page upon page of scholarship. To give a contemporary example, American philosopher Hilary Putnam has presented James as a trailblazer in moral relativism, while Putnam's wife and fellow scholar, Ruth Anna Putnam, has argued that James is more aptly called a moral pluralist.¹⁴ She also edited *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, an impressive collection of essays by James scholars—including historians like David Hollinger—but the majority of time is spent on esoteric metaphysics, not history.¹⁵ Two papers by intellectual historians are included in the collection, but they concentrate on ideas rather than context. This is understandable, since the book is marketed as a philosophy anthology. For example, David Hollinger's "James, Clifford, and the Scientific Conscience" reconsiders James's complete disavowal of Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" in "The Will to Believe." In the article, Hollinger acts more as a philosopher than historian, except for the section where he contrasts the intellectual atmosphere in England and America, to highlight where James and Clifford's ideas had their roots.

¹² Jacques Barzun, *A Stroll with William James* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

¹³ Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006). Richardson's book can also be categorized as intellectual history, similar to works by Menand, Cotkin, and Hollinger.

¹⁴ Ruth Anna Putnam, "William James and Moral Objectivity," *William James Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2006).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

The gray area between intellectual history and philosophy can certainly cause problems in analysis, as it is a constant balancing act between wider history and specific thought. Henry Levinson's *The Religious Investigations of William James* demonstrates this balancing act. Levinson argued that James should primarily be considered a religious thinker, and although the book is shelved in philosophy, the first section is entirely historical background.¹⁶

In a similar vein, Bennett Ramsey's *Submitting to Freedom* argues that James's philosophy was a religious philosophy, providing a new sense of self for Americans who had lost their footing in the uncertainty of the Gilded Age.¹⁷ *Submitting to Freedom*, then, is a philosophy book grounded in history. James did see himself as a philosopher, after all, so it is not surprising that most scholars have analyzed him within his home discipline. Even so, while philosophers have succeeded in analyzing and expanding on James's ideas, most have failed to contextualize James in his time and his own lived experience. In other words, they have neglected the man behind the ideas.

The discipline of history seems to have the opposite problem: the man appears, but deeper understanding of his intellectual concepts eludes. Many have analyzed James in article-length form: David Hollinger, James Polet, and Trygve Thronveit are just a few notable examples.¹⁸ In "William James and the Culture of Inquiry," Hollinger argues that historians have been preoccupied by

¹⁶ See pp. 3-71. Henry Samuel Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

¹⁷ Bennett Ramsay, *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ See David Hollinger, "William James and the Culture of Inquiry," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2000); James Polet, "William James and the Moral Will," *Humanitas*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2001); Trygve Thronveit, "William James's Ethical Republic," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (April 2011).

the question of whether James was ‘tender’ or ‘tough-minded’ (emotional or rational), when the real focus should be how James called to other intellectuals to engage with and interrogate their philosophical tradition.¹⁹ Polet’s article, “William James and the Moral Will,” engages in conversation with Richard Rorty’s philosophic take on James, but shows how Rorty’s lack of historical background limited his interpretation of James. In the context of 19th century scientific positivism and religious belief, Polet argues that James de-absolutized truth to create moral freedom, rather than moral futility or meaninglessness, as Rorty thought.²⁰ Thronveit’s article sets itself up as successor to the work Hollinger has done since the 1980s, coloring in the gaps left by other historians in James’s moral philosophy. He characterizes James’s morality as an “ethical republic,” a place where public and private ideals intersect and constantly evolve according to experience.²¹ These articles, along with those published annually in *William James Studies*, demonstrate that James scholarship is alive and well in article form.

When it comes to full-length treatments, however, there are fewer examples. James often appears in Gilded Age histories, but he is only one thread running through them rather than the focus. Paul A. Carter’s 1971 classic, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age*, includes a few references to James scattered throughout its pages.²² If Carter’s book was a definitive snapshot of the American mind at the turn of the century, James seems, at best, to be on the

¹⁹ Hollinger, pp. 282-3.

²⁰ Polet, p. 23.

²¹ Thronveit, p. 259.

²² See pp. 60, 95, 102, 218. Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971).

periphery of influence. Twenty years after Carter, in *Reluctant Modernism*, George Cotkin includes James in his study of intellectuals at the turn of the century, concluding that they were reluctant modernists, trying to reconcile old Victorian sensibilities with the brave new world that faced them.²³ James is the focus of one particularly outstanding chapter, which describes the rise of popular philosophy and James's place within it as a major cultural player.²⁴ James was a kind of people's philosopher: a man who could reach the public with his earnest style and straightforward presentation while also engaging them about the deepest questions of the human experience.

Like Cotkin, T. J. Jackson Lears uses William James as one member of a larger cast of characters. Unlike Cotkin, however, Lears views James as an anti-modern character rather than a modern one. Thirty years on, Lears's seminal work remains *No Place of Grace*.²⁵ In it, Lears presents James as one example of the emergent anti-modern worldview at the turn of the century. His open, pluralistic philosophy was largely a soothing cure for the "acids of modernity"; a means to the end of self-revitalization and therapy popularized in the Gilded Age.²⁶

Since *No Place of Grace*, Lears has somewhat revised his take on James. In his 2009 book, *Rebirth of a Nation: the Making of Modern America, 1877-*

²³ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992). Cotkin characterizes James as a reluctant modernist in the sense that his continuing 'belief in belief' was an inheritance of Victorian ideals, while his stance as a public philosopher and pluralist made him modern. In his case, this marriage produced pragmatism. See p. 50.

²⁴ See "Chapter Two: The Experiences of American Philosophy," pp. 27-50.

²⁵ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xviii.

1920, Lears examines the Gilded Age from a political perspective and comes to the conclusion that a combination of militarism, racism, and imperialism renewed America between the Civil War and the First World War.²⁷ This time, he emphasizes James's activist morality and his support of a 'real fight,' and gives more weight to James's calls for moral responsibility. Although Lears has modified his picture of James as a therapeutic figure, the man's image remains cloudy. While it is true that James provided therapeutic release to Americans amidst uncertainty, he also served as an historical agent who potently influenced the American mind. In the end, his philosophy was much more challenging than comforting.

As we have seen, James pops up intermittently throughout the chapters of period studies, but a mention here and a paragraph there limits historical understanding. As historian Paul Jerome Croce put it:

James is widely recognized, generally admired, and frequently studied, but his canonization has often portrayed him as a charming avuncular presence, rather than a potent cultural player.²⁸

Croce pinpoints the problem with painting James as a kind grandfather or uncle: it prevents historians from recognizing his philosophy's potency and long-lasting influence on American culture. Croce's work itself is the exception to this description. In *Science and Religion in the Era of William James*, James moves to center stage, from his position in the wings. Croce envisioned his work as a 'cultural biography,' stitching James's life and works firmly into his

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

²⁸ Paul Jerome Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James, Volume One: Eclipse of Certainty, 1820-1880* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. ix.

historical context. He demonstrates that James straddled two worlds: the intellectual confidence of the early 19th century and the doubt of the late 19th century.

Croce begins by examining the cultural attitudes of the generation to which James's father belonged, and ends by examining the probabilistic revolution in science and reactions to it. His discussion of Darwin and the break down of positivistic science is outstanding, and provides a unique perspective on how James built his middle way between the ruins of scientific and religious certainty.²⁹ Croce's work has one major shortcoming, albeit an atypical one. *Science and Religion in the Era of William James* was not meant to be a stand-alone piece; Croce planned a second volume to describe James's particular philosophic response to uncertainty, and alludes to this volume throughout the text.³⁰ But the follow-up volume was never published, leaving a gap in historical scholarship. As a single-volume work, *Science and Religion* feels like a long introduction setting the scene for something larger, which never comes. One aim of this thesis is to continue what he began and start to fill in the gap.

A second aim is to contribute to another under-developed section of scholarship, by situating James within religious history. James may be ever-present in the philosophy of religion, but he is notably absent in the history of religion. For instance, open up three influential religious histories—George Marsden's *Religion and American Culture*, Mark Noll's *A History of*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, *passim*, see in particular the conclusion: "William James and the Culture of Uncertainty," pp. 225-232.

³⁰ In the first volume, Croce only covers James's childhood and early experimentation in scientific studies, and he ends his narrative of William James's life in 1880, before any of James's major works were published.

Christianity in the United States and Canada, and Noll's *The Old Religion in a New World*—and one finds a single sentence on James in total.³¹ Both Noll and Marsden astutely portray the Gilded Age as a time when modern skepticism, Protestant liberalism, and mysticism pushed the ruins of the old traditions deeper into the quicksand. James created a dialogue among them; for this reason, he should be part of the discussion.

Perhaps part of the reason for the absence of James in history—of religion or otherwise—is the current climate of historical research, in which intellectual history is seen as somewhat passé. An intellectual approach, however, is exactly what is needed to study an intellectual. It is the only way to integrate the man, his ideas, and his time into a complete picture. James's thought was a response to the moment in time in which he lived. In order to understand his thought and his life, we must first understand his times.

³¹ The sentence appears in *The Old Religion in a New World*, p. 203. Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002); Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992); George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).

*Chapter One:
The World of William James*

Many historians brand various eras in history as ‘the birth of the modern age.’ A very strong case can be made for the period between roughly 1865 and 1920. The year is 1860; the place, Chicago. A man walks down the main street, his journey lit by the occasional gas street lamp. He hears the click-clack of horses’ hooves as a carriage passes by, kicking up dirt from the road. He looks up at a candlelit window in a fifth-storey window, the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in the city, and continues on his way. Fast-forward to 1915. The same man, now elderly, walks down the same street. As he looks up, electric streetlights compete with lit-up marquees, while a car drives by along the paved street. Rickety fire escapes snake up the city’s skyscrapers. Trams rumble along the tracks on the road, connected to wires criss-crossing the sky above them. What must this Chicago native have thought of all the changes to his hometown in his own lifetime?

Chicago’s transformation from a pre-Civil War transportation hub to industrial behemoth—founded only in 1830, and tripling its population between 1880 and 1900—mirrors the wider, all-encompassing change that the United States underwent during the period.³² No part of society was left untouched: economics, politics, technology, culture, social norms, and intellectual life all were affected. Detailing those changes is certainly important. Even more

³² Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, Hill & Wang, 1982), p. 116.

essential, however, is the impact of those changes on Americans' inner lives—in other words, the thoughts of the Chicago native taking a stroll through downtown Chicago. Did he see life differently than he once did? Did that make him joyful or unsettled? Often, recalling our own thoughts from just yesterday proves a challenge, let alone getting inside the head of another person far removed from us in time and circumstance. Nonetheless, it is essential to understand history as it was experienced.

Detailing the immense societal changes of the Gilded Age, and their subsequent effect on Americans' inner lives, will be the focus of this contextual chapter. While James does not appear explicitly, he does appear between the lines. This was his era; this was his generation. He shared in the experiences of societal, cultural, technological, and economic change that animated the times. Instead of dealing with James's personal experiences, this chapter instead places him in a wider historical context and paints a portrait of the wider world he inhabited.

Capitalist Chaos

The change that most distinctly characterizes the Gilded Age in America occurred in economics. Over a period of fewer than fifty years, the country swapped its self-sufficient agricultural identity for an industrialized, capitalist one. The change was a “trauma” and “so swift and thorough that many

Americans seemed unable to fathom the extent of the upheaval.”³³ The age that emerged was one “of Robber Barons and the epic scale of enterprises” and “the speculative carnival . . . of Wall Street and Washington.”³⁴ People still paid lip service to hard work and individualism, but the new capitalists were “magicians of money,” making the greenback appear with seemingly no effort at all.³⁵ The craze of capitalism both intrigued and repulsed Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, who co-wrote a novel, *The Gilded Age*, which defined the era and whose title gave it its name. The Colonel, *The Gilded Age*’s protagonist, had a “tongue [that] was a magician’s wand that turned apples into figs and water into wine as easily as it could change a hovel into a palace and poverty into future riches.”³⁶ Unlike Wall Street sleight of hand, America’s industrialization and its contribution to economic development was far more tangible and measurable. Raw steel production, for example, totalled 13 tons in 1860, while in 1890 it had skyrocketed to 5,000 tons, surpassing older industrialized countries such as England and Germany. In American agriculture, a single farmer at the turn of the century could produce the same amount that would have taken eighteen men and horses to produce in 1830.³⁷ Laissez-faire capitalism was the country’s new king, allowing enterprises to industrialize and wealth to multiply.

This wealth was spread unevenly. John D. Rockefeller’s personal wealth alone commanded two percent of America’s gross national product by 1913.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 5

³⁴ *Ibid.*; T. J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York, HarperCollins, 2009), p. 42.

³⁵ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 51.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁷ Trachtenberg, p. 52.

Adjusted for inflation, his billion-dollar fortune would now be roughly \$190 billion dollars—three times that of Bill Gates, the richest man in the world today.³⁸ But in rags-to-riches America, there were far more rags than riches. According to figures of 12 million households surveyed in the 1890 census, only one million families brought home more than \$1,200 a year; the other 11 million made an average of \$380 a year, which put them well below the poverty line.³⁹ Part of the problem was due to the hierarchical business structure that emerged during the period. A market economy demanded a new species of businessmen to run new corporations—in came the lawyers, publicists, accountants, and advertising executives. The corporate structure, epitomized in the image of business offices overlooking the factory floor so familiar to us today, became “increasingly removed from the machines and labor in the factory itself . . . the increasingly rigid social stratification that accompanied the dramatic rise in industrial productivity confused, angered, and frustrated masses of Americans.”⁴⁰ The worker on the ground was at once told to aspire to the American dream of becoming a self-made man, while at the same time the rigid corporate structure prevented him from doing so. The burgeoning business bureaucracy still touted the virtues of economic individualism and self-sufficiency. In reality, American values had been turned upside down, to the extent that our man walking down the Chicago Street in 1915 was tensing up

³⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 61.

³⁹ These are Charles Spahr’s calculations based on the 1890 census, analyzed by Alan Trachtenberg. Another stark statistic: “In the population as a whole, the richest one percent earned more than the total income of the poorest *fifty* percent.” Trachtenberg, p. 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

with a growing sense of unease and uncertainty about the ethics of a laissez-faire capitalist economy.

The gulf between rich and poor was now too difficult to ignore. Severe depressions in 1873 and 1893 provided stark contrast to supposed times of plenty, and labour unrest was rife. In 1886, known as the “Great Upheaval,” 700,000 workers walked off their jobs. Workers staged 10,000 strikes in the decade altogether.⁴¹ In his 1882 work *Progress and Poverty*, American social critic Henry George describes a Gilded Age that was a world away from the Rockefeller and Carnegie mansions:

The march of invention has clothed mankind with powers of which a century ago the boldest imagination could not have dreamed. But in factories . . . little children are hard at work . . . large classes are maintained by charity . . . amid the great accumulations of wealth, men die of starvation and puny infants suckle dry breasts; while everywhere the greed of grain, the worship of wealth, shows the force of the fear of want. The promised land flies before us like a mirage. The fruits of the tree of knowledge turn as we grasp them to apples of Sodom that crumble to the touch.⁴²

By juxtaposing contemporary reality with biblical metaphor, George created a compelling social critique of the world he saw around him. Henry George’s observations, interpretations, and anxieties match those of many other observers who wondered if capitalism was Christian at all. If God really existed and held sway in human lives, would not he have led his people to create a fairer economic structure? Doubts were percolating, and as they “grew about the justice and equity of laissez-faire capitalism, so too did doubts about God—or at

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴² Henry George qtd. in Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 108.

least the way He was used by liberal political economists.”⁴³ God seemed to have become subservient to money. There was a new deity to worship, and a new golden rule to follow. As Henry Flagler, the railroad magnate, liked to say, “Do unto others as they would do unto you—and do it first.”⁴⁴

An Urban Landscape

In addition to the structural and sub-structural changes to Gilded Age America caused by economics and politics, surface changes also took place thanks to urbanization, immigration, and technology. Unlike economics or politics, these changes were more obvious and visibly altered the look and feel of the American landscape, rather than its underpinnings. In addition to capitalists and cronies, the Gilded Age gave birth to cities. These were cities like never before, as wave after wave of wanderers rolled in from the countryside. In many rural townships, populations dropped by up to forty percent, until the areas around the new centres became skeletons of their former selves, their flesh and blood pulled away by cities.⁴⁵ Cities shared the experience of upheaval, although a markedly different kind. A turn-of-the-century city saw “old landmarks destroyed . . . a new scale of tall building obliterating older buildings, neighbourhoods changing their face as well as their ethnic and social character, as homes formerly of the rich became multiple flats

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Henry Flagler qtd. in Lears, *Rebirth of A Nation*, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Trachtenberg, p. 114.

and crowded rooms.”⁴⁶ The rapid, frantic nature of American urbanization and industrialization made New York and Chicago feel much different than their European counterparts, whose earlier, much more gradual growth preserved medieval old towns, Baroque public squares and buildings, and the parks, museums, and boulevards characteristic of earlier 19th century city planners.⁴⁷ The crowded grid in American cities lacked continuity with the past, which would prove to have a dislocating effect on the American psyche.

Alongside rapid urbanization, waves of European immigration washed up onto American shores in the years following the Civil War, forever altering the American landscape. Most Gilded Age histories give immigration only a passing mention, usually when referring to the faceless mass of the working class, most of them immigrants. But the constant movement of people into and throughout the country during the period lent the Gilded Age a destabilizing, uncertain character, and caused massive changes in the make-up of the nation. Between 1855 and 1890, for example, eight million immigrants came through Castle Garden in New York alone—the days of Ellis Island and its immense intake had not yet even arrived.⁴⁸ To provide perspective, in 1860 the population of the United States was roughly 31.5 million. Just 50 years later, in 1910, owing to natural growth, immigration, and the advent of technology, the population had tripled to about 92 million.⁴⁹ America was a different world than

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ United States Census Bureau, “1860 Fast Facts – Population” <https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1860_fast_facts.html>, and “1910 Fast Facts – Population” <https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1910_fast_facts.html>

what it had been—small towns where self-initiative and individualism held sway had given way to impersonal cities where the power of the individual to shape and control his or her own life seemed lost in the fray. In a country with an exponentially growing population, ever-changing ethnic demographics, and an ever-migrating population, Americans understandably began to experience the poisonous combination of restlessness and powerlessness.

Technology and Consumerism

The technological revolution further deepened feelings of being removed from ‘real life.’ It seemed a new and unfamiliar world was dawning: “time and space would soon be annihilated by telephone, telegraph and airplane; machinery would abolish ‘the curse of labor,’ and social science would point the way to a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, [and a] new set of moral maxims would replace the old commandments of religions.”⁵⁰ Technological advances seemed to be the sign of the times—optimistic change for the betterment of society. Handmade items became quaint instead of quotidian, and in factories and farms “workers themselves were required to *know* less in order to perform their tasks—to know less because their machines know more.”⁵¹ Mass-produced newspapers seemed to have the same effect on all classes: “the more knowable the world came to seem as *information*, the

www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1910_fast_facts.html> (accessed 31 July 2014).

⁵⁰ Cook, p. 61.

⁵¹ Trachtenberg, p. 68.

more remote and opaque it came to seem as *experience*.”⁵² Technology even reshaped things as elemental as time, light, and flight. During the first airplane flight over Chicago in 1910, a minister in the crowd remarked, “Never have I seen such wonder in the faces of the multitude. From the gray-haired man to the child, everyone seemed to feel that it was a new day in their lives.”⁵³

Technology touched on more than convenience or efficiency; it affected people’s hearts and minds. For most people, the pace of change left them dizzy and confused, as if a part of themselves had gotten trampled and left behind somewhere in the march of material progress.

By the turn of the century, Americans sought to regain this lost part of themselves by diving headlong into pleasure and consumption. The characteristic public restraint of the Victorian era had come up hard against a new ethos: one that pursued experience (i.e. pleasure) as an end in itself and used money as a means of self-invention (consumption). Such a profound cultural shift erupted from the same undercurrent of anxiety that ran throughout the whole period: the “subtle dis-ease, a feeling that . . . reality was throbbing with vitality, pulsating with excitement, and always *just* out of reach.”⁵⁴

Americans wholeheartedly pursued elusive experience. They piled into nightclubs, rocketed along in roller-coasters or lazed in the sun at Coney Island, grazed at new public libraries and department stores, and toned their muscles lifting weights and bicycling the streets. The personal-fitness craze arose out of

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵³ qtd. in Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 248.

⁵⁴ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 232 (emphasis added).

worry that “brainworkers” were falling further away from ‘real life.’ In the 1889 Harper’s article “How to Get Strong and Stay So,” William Blaikie wrote:

A hundred years ago, there was more done to make our men and women hale and vigorous than there is to-day. Over eighty percent of all our men then were farming, hunting, or fishing, rising early, out all day in the pure, bracing air, giving many muscles very active work, eating wholesome food, retiring early, and so laying in a good stock of vitality and health. But now hardly forty percent are farmers, and nearly all the rest are at callings—mercantile, mechanical, or professional—which do almost nothing to make one sturdy and enduring.⁵⁵

This desire for vitality reflects American pleasure seekers’ search for authentic experience, lost somewhere along the way. Aimless nostalgia and determined desire drove Americans toward each successive new fad.

What makes Gilded Age pleasure-seekers so unique, however, is how ‘real life’ became inextricably tied up in consumer culture. Post-Victorians were obsessed about desire—a desire to pursue life—but even this desire was in itself a produced commodity. Economic, political, technological, and social changes had separated Americans from their moorings, as they looked for new ways to define themselves. Lacking continuity, they needed something to tether them to solid ground. Consumerism provided something tangible, quite literally. Pleasure-seekers-turned-consumers “were filled with a devouring hunger for reality, but they had the misfortune to confuse this with matter—which is but the hollow and deceptive wrapping of it. Thus they lived perpetually in a wretched, padded, puffed-out world of cotton-wool, cardboard, and tissue-paper.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, when the boxes of new purchases had been emptied,

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 233.

Americans were left feeling strangely empty, with only a familiar malaise—and many receipts—to keep them company.

This was the world for Americans between the Civil War and the First World War America. One final illustration unites every theme in this chapter and captures the conflict at the heart of this critical moment in time—the conflict between rhetoric and action, optimism and uncertainty, appearances and reality. Picture this. Railroad-car manufacturer George Pullman built the town of Pullman, Illinois to house his workers. He did so as a self-professed act of philanthropic paternalism. On the surface, the town seemed a model community. Visitors commented that “all that is ugly, discordant, and demoralizing is eliminated.” They saw it as “a solution of the industrial problem based on mutual recognition.”⁵⁷ In reality, George Pullman designed his town as a capitalist creation, meant to turn a profit. He coordinated every detail like a puppeteer pulling strings. “Unity of design and unexpected variety charm us as we saunter through the town,” economist Richard T. Ely observed, but he soon realized that “the citizen is surrounded by constant restraint and restriction and everything is done for him, nothing by him . . . [giving] an all-pervading sense of insecurity.”⁵⁸ One of Pullman’s residents echoes this foreboding feeling: “We are born in a Pullman house. We are fed from a Pullman shop, taught in a Pullman school, catechized in Pullman church and when we die we shall be buried in a Pullman cemetery and go to Pullman hell.”⁵⁹ Somehow the

⁵⁷ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 183.

⁵⁸ Richard T. Ely qtd. in Trachtenberg, p. 224.

⁵⁹ Striking worker qtd. in Smithsonian Centre for Education and Museum Studies, “Quote from a Pullman Labourer, 1883,” *Smithsonian Source*

American dream had turned into a nightmare, leaving everyone—including William James—wondering how to wake up.

<http://www.smithsoniansource.org/display/primarysource/viewdetails.aspx?PrimarySourceId=1221> (accessed 10 August 2014).

*Chapter Two:
The Works of William James*

If the social and economic context in which William James found himself was tumultuous and uncertain, intellectual life was even more turbulent. In order to understand James's thought, we must also understand the ideas he inherited, the thoughts he rejected, and how they both formed the basis of his new thought. James represents a middle road, a practical mindset, a rational defence of belief that ties together the fraying threads of modernity, and therein lies his contribution to American religious history.

James found himself caught between two once mighty belief structures now crumbling and shifting: science and religion. Between the Civil War and First World War, the war of ideals raged on both sides of the Atlantic. While science had traditionally provided support for religious belief, their relationship had changed tone by the 1860s. Science challenged religion; irrationalism defied rationalism; positivistic materialism confronted idealistic Hegelianism. This war of the mind began with absolute conviction on both sides—Comte's scientific positivism or Hegel's absolute idealism come to mind—but as the turn of the century approached, neither scientists nor theologians were as sure of their positions as they once had been. New discoveries in science and new approaches to Christianity had cast doubt over everything once thought true, even the nature of truth itself. Even science, once the bastion of confident knowledge and home to one technological marvel after another, increasingly found the world to be unknowable, while religion no longer had the same

support from science and seemed increasingly out of touch as society lost faith. Like capitalists and working class laymen in factories, intellectuals, clergy, and philosophers in universities, like James, felt the sands of certainty slip away underfoot.

Scientific Uncertainty in the Gilded Age

The world of nineteenth-century science belongs to Darwin. In James's studies at the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard as a young man in the 1860s, he was encircled by Darwinian theory, and rightfully so. Darwin's *Origin of Species* triggered an earthquake in thinking that demolished perceptions of humans' relation to nature and the divine. Since Aristotle, people had believed that species were unchanging. God had created each one in the Garden of Eden, and they endured forever in that same form. Darwin's evolutionary theory not only proposed that species constantly change and adapt, but they do so in a hostile, chaotic world governed by natural laws with no greater end than simple survival.⁶⁰ No God needed. Furthermore, humans were not exempt from the savagery: animals were our ancestors, not Adam and Eve.⁶¹ Darwinism, as Sir William Dawson worriedly remarked, "reduces the position of man, who becomes a descendant of inferior animals, and a mere term in an end series that is unknown. It removes from the study of nature the ideas of final

⁶⁰ Darwinism also challenged the traditional Newtonian, anthropocentric worldview. Man was no longer the center of the universe—an unsettling thought for many people. Cotkin, p. 1.

⁶¹ Cook, p. 11.

cause and purpose.”⁶² Darwin never absolutely ruled out the possibility of God, and was nominally Christian, but his evolutionary theory, if followed to its logical conclusion, rejected “the regal nature of man” and blurred “the dividing line between the human and the animal, between vaunted reason and vicious instincts . . . So much for the nobility of men.”⁶³ Some intellectuals who believed in God welcomed evolutionary theory—Henry Ward Beecher called it a “great truth” and a “powerful aid” to Jesus’s teachings—while others refused to believe it.⁶⁴ Louis Agassiz, one such sceptic, took James along as a student intern on his expedition to the Amazon in 1865, collecting fish and plant samples with the aim of disproving evolution.⁶⁵ The trip was unsuccessful. Agassiz’s observations were inconclusive and the questions remained unanswered. In any case, the secure, confident age of natural philosophy—the study of the world as created by God—had officially come to a close.

Darwin’s ideas clearly challenged the view of the world as stable, unchanging, and governed by goodness. But his approach to biology in the *Origin of Species* also questioned views of how science itself should be practiced, something that has been traditionally overlooked in evolutionary historiography.⁶⁶ Darwin not only revolutionized science with his *ideas*, but also with his *method*. His ideas were solely that: theories only, not certainties. He focused on observing, gathering data, and making conjectures, following an

⁶² Sir William Dawson, president of McGill University, qtd. in *ibid.*

⁶³ Cotkin, p. 145.

⁶⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1885), p. 4.

⁶⁵ For a re-construction of the trip using James’s letters, drawings, and diary entries, see Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), pp. 65-73.

⁶⁶ Paul Jerome Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James: The Eclipse of Certainty, 1820-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 88, 155.

empirical, inductive method. Unlike his predecessors, he did not spend much time proving that what he said was absolutely true. He provided a possible, partial, probable truth. This, in a nutshell, represented the probabilistic revolution in science. Truth was an empirical process—if human beings could evolve, truth could too, and still remain meaningful.⁶⁷ James undoubtedly absorbed this idea during his studies. Darwinian science and its successors gave up science’s claim to a “virtual monopoly of knowledge,” severely shaking the confidence of scientific materialism.⁶⁸

Doubts about scientific certainty continued into the 1890s and early 1900s, as quantum physicists began to realize that atoms were in fact divisible, that Newton’s gravity was only true in very limited circumstances, and that the speed of light could not be used as a constant by which to measure the universe. Suddenly, as Roland Stromberg phrases it, even “space, time, and matter all turned out to be fictions of the human mind.”⁶⁹ In physics, research culminated with Einstein’s theory of relativity, which re-drew the causal story of the universe, further heightening peoples’ uncertainty. $E=mc^2$ held that matter and energy were relatives, not absolutes, holding the universe together.⁷⁰ In an age where humans ‘tamed’ nature with scientific marvels like electricity, airplanes, and X-rays, and the popularity of science skyrocketed, those who actually investigated the mysteries of the universe encountered enigma after enigma, leaving them with more questions than answers. A once knowable and

⁶⁷ Cotkin, p. 27.

⁶⁸ Roland Stromberg, *European Intellectual History since 1789*, 6th ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 192; Croce, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Stromberg, pp. 203-207.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

quantifiable world had become unknowable—a place where the only certainty was uncertainty.

Religious Uncertainty in the Gilded Age

In the late nineteenth century, things were much the same in the realm of religion, an area in which James became more and more interested as he grew older. In the West, Christianity had been under assault since the Renaissance. By the turn of the twentieth century, the one-two punch of Darwinism and biblical criticism had left mainstream religion reeling. Darwin may have challenged the validity of the book of Genesis, but the new literary trend called Higher Criticism challenged the infallibility of the entire Bible.⁷¹ Increasingly, theologians sought historical context for the Bible, dating each book, tracking down their sources, and examining stories as examples of cultural myth. Jesus suddenly lost his uniqueness as scholars found out that “myths of the martyr, the victim, the miracle-worker, the Man of the People, the Wanderer, and others found in the Christ saga belong to the storehouse of stories told by every people.”⁷² Matthew and Luke may have been divinely inspired to write their accounts of the life of Jesus. Like any good researcher, however, they appeared to use outside sources, such as the Gospel of Mark. The search for the ‘historical Jesus’ did not sound the death knell for Christianity, but Higher Criticism did bring the Bible down to earth, where it represented “a part of

⁷¹ Noll, pp. 368-369.

⁷² Stromberg, p. 210.

human history, not simply the record of a divine miracle.”⁷³ Without historical evidence to support them, supernatural stories of Jesus walking on water and raising people from the dead were now shadowed in doubt or seen as simply a metaphor. Questioning the literal truth of the Bible escalated to the point that the questions raised put the Bible’s larger absolute truths in grave danger. Mainstream denominations in America—Methodism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism—tended to continue teaching the gospel in a conservative way for a time, unresponsive to the challenges posed by Higher Criticism. There was often a significant delay between biblical criticism’s new teaching and a church addressing it in a Sunday sermon.⁷⁴ From the outside, it seemed that religion was preaching an antiquated message. If Christianity were to survive, it would have to modernize that message.

New Christian movements, working to revise their respective traditions, did just that. Groups such as the Social Gospel movement transformed traditional religion’s transcendent focus to a social one. This life—here on earth—replaced the afterlife. Social Gospel’s founder, Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist, placed focus on service, whether it was in a tent giving vaccinations out in rural areas or distributing food in poor tenements in the city. Emphasis shifted away from “the mysteries of grace, the sanctity of the individual’s relationship with God, and the unfathomable experience of religious belief” towards a practical, socially relevant religion for this day and

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Noll, p. 368.

age.⁷⁵ Likewise, “man’s salvation was gradually replaced by a concern with social salvation; the traditional Christian emphasis on man’s relationship with God shifted to a focus on man’s relationship with man.”⁷⁶ The aim was not to fear hell and damnation, but to create a Kingdom of God on earth by loving people right there, right then. Christians had always served their neighbours, but for the first time, loving them involved developing systematic solutions to the particular problems posed by the industrial capitalism of modern society.

Revivalism also grew out of concerns about the problems of contemporary society, and the lost and rootless people trapped within it. The Student Volunteer Movement, Pentecostalism, and growth in missionary activity all emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century.⁷⁷ Revivalist movements offered a renewal, an energy that conservative, mainstream Christianity could not. Sermons like those given by evangelist Dwight L. Moody not only provided a touchstone of traditional values amidst the quicksand of modern times, but also focused on the hope for the future—a hope that was tangible, full of life and power when mainstream, denominational Christianity seemed lifeless.⁷⁸ There was also power in the revivalist teaching that even while the times were changing, the ultimate purpose remained the same: loving others. As George Santayana, student and colleague of William James, remarked: evangelicals “existed only to serve [the

⁷⁵ Cotkin, pp. 24-5.

⁷⁶ Cook, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Noll, pp. 290-291, 386.

⁷⁸ Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 81.

world], and their highest divine credential was that the world needed them.”⁷⁹

Revivalism, as it turned out, had a great deal in common with Social Christianity.

The Spiritualist movement represented another alternative to mainstream, denominational Christianity. Unlike Revivalism or the Social Gospel, Spiritualism dealt with reconciling science and religion. Science had cast doubt on the supernatural elements of religion, so the Spiritualists designed experiments to prove that an extra-sensory world could indeed exist. Although séances and telekinesis do not seem particularly scientific, Spiritualists were in fact trying to empirically demonstrate immortality in the wake of failed traditional apologetics.⁸⁰ For Spiritualists, the proof was in the poltergeist. But their contribution was more than just paranormal. Their experiments rebuilt the dialogue between science and religion. Their openness to a wider world later inspired William James in his own empirical investigations of religion when he studied mysticism and personal religious experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁸¹ Spiritualism, Revivalism, the Social Gospel, and other offshoots of mainstream Christianity seemed like perfect answers to the changing times; religion could once again be the helping hand, quenching the thirst of all those stuck in the sinking sands of modern times.⁸² As time marched

⁷⁹ George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1920), pp. 14-15.

⁸⁰ Trachtenberg, pp. 67-8.

⁸¹ See Chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁸² On the surface, it seemed like a healthy picture. Protestant membership in America almost tripled from 1860 (4.5 million) to 1890 (12.5 million), although this could be attributed to natural population growth and immigration, not the conversion of individuals. For the statistics see Edwin S. Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 110.

on, however, a new problem arose. Denominations became diluted as more and more movements broke off from mainstream Christianity. Also, as religion shifted focus, theological concepts often became diluted. For instance, the role of Jesus as a model of selfless service, a moral teacher, or a supernaturalist came to the forefront, while his role as the Son of God faded into the background. Diluted religion might be easier to swallow, but dilute it too much, and it loses its potency.

For those trying to swallow this new mixture of watered down religion, uncertain science, and turbulent society, it left a bitter taste in their mouths. A clear sign of the state of Americans' inner lives came when George Miller Beard identified the disease "neurasthenia" in his study, *American Nervousness*.⁸³ James was just one of the many sufferers of this nervous condition, and the disease's explosion was a sign of the urban, industrial reality that Americans encountered. It was a 'dis-ease' in the most literal sense—an absence of ease. Symptoms included "fear of responsibility, of open places or closed places, fear of society, fear of being alone, fear of fears, fear of contamination, fear of everything, deficient mental control, lack of decision in trifling matters, hopelessness."⁸⁴ Its cause? Beard could only attribute it vaguely to "modern civilization." Its effect? A neurasthenic was "at best a walking shadow, at worst a bed-ridden invalid."⁸⁵ Neurasthenia plagued James in extreme episodes like these throughout his life, and his private letters reflect the

⁸³ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 7.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

hopelessness and powerlessness he felt during those times.⁸⁶ The depression going on inside fin-de-siècle minds was epidemic. One physician examining patients called it a kind of “moral sea-sickness,” while others pointed to ennui and anomie.⁸⁷ Whatever the case description, the cause seemed clear: the era itself.

This was the era in which William James found himself: America at a critical juncture. On the face of it, the chaos and confusion of being caught between the 19th and 20th centuries would seem to impede clear thinking. For many it did, but for James this feeling of standing at a crossroads triggered his intellectual development. His era’s influences can be seen throughout his works, his religious works in particular. This chapter will focus on three case studies of James’s early essays about religion, to highlight his most revolutionary religious ideas. With one foot simultaneously in the metaphysical world and the other in the physical, James wrote and lectured on “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” “Is Life Worth Living?” and “The Will to Believe.” In each, he made a case for a different aspect of the religious worldview. In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” he defended ethics based on belief. In “Is Life Worth Living?” he defended belief in courage and optimism. In “The Will to Believe” he defended belief itself. He attempted to preserve a spiritual core amidst an increasingly materialistic, atomistic society. In doing so, he satisfied

⁸⁶ See, for example, a letter to Thomas W. Ward from January 1868 in Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James, Vol. 1* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), p. 132.

⁸⁷ Max Nordau, German physician, qtd. in Cotkin, p. 145.

the modern spiritual longing of many people, addressed the public's burning questions of faith, and found a way to believe in belief in an uncertain world.

The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life

Long before James famously expounded his 'will to believe' or explored the varieties of religious experience, he had religion on his mind. While teaching at Harvard, James gave a talk at the Yale Philosophical Club on his theory of ethical philosophy in 1891. For those in the audience, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" may have sounded more like an empiricist work than a religious one. James opens the essay with a seemingly scientific take on morality: "there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance . . . there can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his say."⁸⁸ Even today, historians have often overlooked the essay's significance to James's religious thought, falling for the opening salvo and missing his ultimate conclusions. James pulls a metaphorical and metaphysical rabbit out of his hat at the end of the paper, revealing his true line of thought—a purely humanist morality is perfectly functional although ultimately inadequate. Morality can exist on purely human terms, but moral objectivity cannot.⁸⁹ Without belief, the meaning

⁸⁸ William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1927), p. 184.

⁸⁹ Michael R. Slater, "Ethical Naturalism and Religious Ethics in 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,'" *William James Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2007), *passim*.

of morality is eventually lost. James's defence of ethics based on belief formed the first cornerstone of his religious philosophy.

James begins "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" in his scientific persona, merging a philosophical approach with a psychological one and subsequently testing morality empirically. He spends the first twenty pages of the thirty-page paper analyzing three questions: the psychological question, the metaphysical question, and the casuistic question. He postulates that "the psychological question asks after the historical *origin* of our moral ideas and judgements; the metaphysical question asks what the very *meaning* of the words 'good,' 'ill,' and 'obligation' are; the casuistic question asks what is the *measure* of the various goods and ills which men recognize."⁹⁰ Fresh off writing *The Principles of Psychology*, James answers the first question as a psychologist and a layman guided by common sense. For most people, he argues, morality simply "must have arisen from the association with acts of simple bodily pleasures and reliefs [sic] from pain."⁹¹ In James's day, these utilitarian ideas represented by the figures of Bentham and Mill loomed large, but James differentiates himself from them. He forges his own path because he feels that there is more to it than simple pleasure and pain. Our ideals, says James, "do not merely repeat the couplings of experience . . . They are not all explicable as signifying corporeal pleasures to be gained, and pains to be escaped."⁹² At this point in the paper, James has distanced himself from utilitarian morality, but still his account of ethics seems like a naturalist one.

⁹⁰ James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," p. 185.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

He continues by exploring his next question—the metaphysics of morality. This time, instead of a purely psychological or scientific approach, he uses his trademark flair for metaphor. He slowly constructs a moral universe from the ground up, one soul at a time. He begins with a world where there are none at all, and draws the conclusion that, in that world, good and evil do not exist. “Betterness is not a physical [fact]” and so does not exist in a purely physical world.⁹³ It exists only in the mind. James then takes the next step, by introducing a person into this materialist universe and observing what happens:

The moment one sentient being, however, is made a part of the universe, there is a chance for goods and evils really to exist. Moral relations now have their *status*, in that being’s consciousness. So far as he feels anything to be good, he *makes* it good. It *is* good, for him; and being good for him, is absolutely good, for he is the sole creator of values in that universe, and outside of his opinion things have no moral character at all.⁹⁴

This is the land of “moral solitude,” but James will not let it last for long. He introduces a second thinker, making the universe a “moral dualism.” Now there is another person with their own ideas about what is good and evil, with a claim to truth equal to the first person’s truth. Extrapolate on this trend, and the universe becomes a “moral pluralism.” There are plenty of souls, plenty of opinions, but no way to tell which are superior and which are inferior. Where moral subjectivity abounds, moral objectivity cannot be found.

For the time being, James is comfortable with this much. In order to be an ethical republic, all his universe needs is a collection of minds whose

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* In this first stage of his moral universe, James seems to be painting in shades of moral subjectivity similar to Nietzsche and Kant.

consciousness deems things good or bad. No other features are needed. James illustrates his point this way:

Were all other things, gods and men and starry heavens, blotted out from this universe, and were there left but one rock with two loving souls upon it, that rock would have as thoroughly moral a constitution as any possible world which the eternities and immensities could harbour . . . there would be real good things and real bad things in the universe; there would be obligations, claims, and expectations; obediences, refusals, and disappointments; compunctions and longings for harmony to come again, and inward peace of conscience when it was restored; there would, in short, be a moral life.⁹⁵

James seems satisfied with this picture. Although there is no God, no theology, no dogma, there can still be democracy, equality, and a moral society—an “ethical republic,” to use his own words. His observations about the moral universe culminate in the following statement:

Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist . . . we form at any rate an ethical republic here below. And the first reflection which this leads to is that ethics have as genuine and real a foothold in the universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well. ‘The religion of humanity’ affords a basis for ethics as well as theism does.⁹⁶

If judging by this quotation, James would seem to be a thoroughly naturalist philosopher. That impression continues as he answers the final question with which he began: the casuistic question. James comes to the conclusion that we measure morality in a practical sense by a simple maxim: “the essence of good is to satisfy demand.” This is rather vague, so James qualifies: “the guiding principle for ethical philosopher [must] be to satisfy *as many demands as we can* . . . The course of history is nothing but the story of men’s struggles from

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive order.”⁹⁷ James’s ethical philosophy is one of plurality and compromise, of constant revision and evolution, and seems very much like the Utilitarians who came before him. In theory, it looks like a peaceful picture.

In reality, it is problematic. James’s carefully constructed picture of an ethical republic dissolves into moral militancy, a “howling mob of desires, each struggling to get breathing-room for the ideal to which it clings.”⁹⁸ No single philosophy can cover the complexity of our moral experience. Constantly evolving ethics do make for a rich, complex universe in the short run, but in the long run our ideas are incomplete. Says James, “The chief of all reasons why concrete ethics cannot be final is that they have to wait on metaphysical and theological beliefs.”⁹⁹ This sentence, which begins the final section of the essay, marks an about-face in James’s presentation of his ethical philosophy. He converts from a nonreligious ethicist into a religious philosopher.

He eases into the transformation by giving an illustration of two different moral attitudes: the “easy-going mood” and the “strenuous mood.” Very different forces drive them:

When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained . . . It needs the wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations; or else the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom . . . [A] world where all the mountains are brought down and all the valleys are exalted is no congenial place for its habitants. This is why in a solitary thinker this mood might slumber on forever without waking. His various ideals,

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

known to him to be mere preferences of his own, are too nearly the same denominational value: he can play fast and loose with them at will.¹⁰⁰

The easy-going person is internally driven and has only himself to motivate him, so often he makes no move at all. He is drowning in his own subjectivity. A strenuous person, by contrast, does act, because he looks to forces and ideals outside himself. This comparison mirrors the meaning of morality. As religious studies scholar Michael Slater put it, “without an infinite, divine commander our moral ideals lack *objective grounds* and fail to be *sufficiently motivating*.”¹⁰¹

James makes the connection between the moods and morality when he says:

This too is why, in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power. Life, to be sure, is even in such a world a genuinely ethical symphony; but it is played in the compass of a couple of octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up When, however, we believe that a God is there, and that he is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out. The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged. The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal.¹⁰²

Humanity can serve as a basis for morality, but its meaning can only go so far.

By definition, a naturalist ethics is finite and tied to individual consciousness.

The easy-going mood is therefore the nonreligious mood; the strenuous mood is the religious one. The strenuous mood looks to the infinite, to the connection between consciousness and a higher order beyond the fray of competing desires:

Our attitude towards concrete evils is entirely different in a world where we believe that there are none but finite demanders, from what it is in one where we joyously face tragedy for an infinite demander’s sake. Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life’s evils, is set free in those that have religious faith. For this reason the strenuous type of character will on the battle-field of human history

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁰¹ Slater, p. 12.

¹⁰² James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” pp. 212-13.

always outwear the easy-going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall.¹⁰³

The strenuous are stronger than the easy-going because of their belief that what they do *matters* for reasons beyond themselves. They are not only simply “satisfying demand,” whether following their own demands or even those of a country, they are living their life in tune with “a divine thinker with all-encompassing demands.”¹⁰⁴ The final answer to James’s casuistic question—the final meaning of morality itself—is inextricably tied to God.

The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life served as a stepping stone for James to enter into religious discussion. Previously, he had spent twelve years working on *The Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890. As he emerged from that all-consuming project, he realized that America’s modernization was causing people to question the very foundational elements of existence, including morality. Discussing the changing view of morality in the face of modernity is certainly a part of religious history; for many people, morality is the most important, guiding part of religion. Morality serves as an anchor in unstable times. James could feel the fear of many that this anchor was slipping away, driving him to write *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*.

At the turn of the century, questions of morality were assaulting people from all sides. For instance, when President Garfield’s assassin, Charles Guiteau, was put on trial and acquitted because he was declared insane and could not tell right from wrong, it gave people a foreboding feeling.¹⁰⁵ Pleading

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁰⁵ Cotkin, pp. 38-39.

insanity is commonplace today, but a hundred years ago it represented determinism, which “removed responsibility and regret from the world—and thus removed the very possibility of morality. Everyone was lowered to the moral netherworld of Charles Guiteau.”¹⁰⁶ Darwinism also challenged the black and white, right and wrong picture of the moral universe that religion had traditionally presented. Darwin built his theory of evolution on natural selection, on the “ruthless, constant, and ubiquitous struggles for survival, [which] implied that God had created a world without mercy or morality.”¹⁰⁷ The moral order looked more like moral chaos. Just as morality’s face had been changed by the Guiteau case and Darwinism, so too, the rise of the machine had a corresponding impact. In a letter to physicist Samuel Langley, Henry Adams described seeing a dynamo for the first time, standing in awe as it generated electricity: “As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross.”¹⁰⁸ Many now let a new idol guide them: the machine. This was the same machine that allowed factories to exploit the poor in industrial capitalism. The machine seemed worthy of both worship and condemnation on moral grounds. Determinism, natural selection, the machines of industrial capitalism: all are different examples of the same threat—the “mechanization of moral choice”—that Americans felt all around them.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Croce, p. 104.

¹⁰⁸ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, p. 224.

¹⁰⁹ Trachtenberg, p. 45.

Modernity was reshaping the meaning of morality. While some people reacted with a revival of evangelicalism, others felt the need to revise traditional moral definitions. Darwinism and Higher Criticism had caused people to question religion's previously assured truths. In philosophy, the confidence of Absolute Idealism—the idea that there are unchanging, absolute truths and that we can know when we have attained them—seemed out of touch with the uncertain times but still enjoyed enormous popularity with the general public because it provided comforting stability.¹¹⁰ People worried that if they abandoned traditional theology and philosophy, their moral compass would spin uncontrollably. Would morality continue to have meaning if not tied to sin or the Cross? Without a higher power, would there still be an existential reason for morality? Without morality, how could people combat the social injustices and inequality caused by the new urban, industrial capitalist world? These were the concerns of many Americans and, by extension, they were James's concerns.

James dealt with those anxieties by reworking morality from the ground up, approaching it both empirically and intellectually, scientifically and religiously. He found America's axiomatic beliefs, whether in positivistic science or in dogmatic religion, equally objectionable. James's way may have been a middle way between them, but it was radical for the time. For James, rebelling was the only choice. He saw suffering all around him as well as an outdated moral code that seemed largely indifferent to that suffering. This moral code needed to be able to change to fit the demands of the times—in this case, industrial capitalism—and respond to society's problems. As he built his

¹¹⁰ Slater, p. 13.

imaginary moral universe one mind at a time, each with their own perception of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ James introduced the idea of ethical pluralism. Fifty years before his morality became the norm, James advocated pluralistic values and tolerance.¹¹¹ In short, his ethical republic was a democracy.¹¹² James’s empiricist view of morality was also radical. He saw ethics as a science, constantly changing and developing based on acquired experience—a scandalous and provocative idea in his day. What is most significant, however, is how James blended a naturalistic account of ethics with a religious one. He calmed public concerns by confirming that ethics can indeed stand on its own, without dogma or creed. While James did not argue for one specific creed over another, he did argue that belief in *some* form is needed. Morality, after all, is at heart an act of faith. The essence of James’s argument is this: “naturalistic accounts of ethics have *limits* [and] our moral needs *exceed* those limits.”¹¹³ By forging a middle path, James led Americans away from moral meaninglessness, and towards a modern meaning of morality.

Is Life Worth Living?

While *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* had served as a defence of belief for moral reasons, *Is Life Worth Living?* defended belief for vital reasons, in the sense that faith allows us to *live* in a particular way. Now that

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² See the conclusion of Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

James had confirmed that morality was meaningful, he had to prove that life itself was meaningful, despite the shifting sands of modernity. Written as a lecture to the Harvard Young Men's Christian Association in 1895, the essay takes on a very different tone than *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*. Here, James gets personal. *Is Life Worth Living?* feels like a confession, a levelling, a conversation. It is a snapshot of the American heart at a critical juncture, and captures the melancholy inside that heart. James stood in front of the Harvard YMCA and asked his listeners to choose courage and optimism, hope and possibility in the face of pessimism and scepticism. "Pessimism," said James, "is essentially a religious disease . . . it consists in nothing but a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply."¹¹⁴ The key was belief, even without certainty. If people could hold on to this mentality of 'maybe,' they could pull themselves out of the melancholic quicksand of modernity.

James structures *Is Life Worth Living?* more as reflection than argument. Even so, the flow of his thoughts can be divided into two main sections: his exploration of melancholy and his subsequent search for a cure. He begins by quoting bright, joyful passages from Whitman and Rousseau, contrasting them with darker excerpts from James Thomson and Shakespeare. He does this to illustrate to his listeners the highs and lows of human experience; how some seem able to cultivate optimism in the face of adversity, while others always seem to be weighed down by pessimism. Unfortunately, the pessimistic viewpoint seems to be more commonplace, prompting James to discuss the concerning rise of suicides in America. This "nightmare view of life" seems to

¹¹⁴ William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, p. 39.

be epidemic, and James clearly felt something needed to be said about it.¹¹⁵ His premise for *Is Life Worth Living?* is simple: “My task, let me say now, is practically narrow, and my words are to deal only with that metaphysical *tedium vitae* which is peculiar to reflecting men . . . Let me say, immediately, that my final appeal is to nothing more recondite than religious faith.”¹¹⁶ Pessimism and melancholia may have been epidemic, but it was also treatable by belief.

First, James tries to get to the root of the melancholia plaguing the modern mind. In essence, it comes down to the riddle of human experience: how can such evil and such goodness coexist in a world supposedly governed by a supremely benevolent God? What people see in nature and what they see in their sacred books does not match up. The universe is a constant contradiction:

Beauty and hideousness, love and cruelty, life and death keep house together in indissoluble partnership; and there gradually steals over us, instead of the old warm notion of a man-loving Deity, that of an awful power that neither hates nor loves, but rolls all things together meaninglessly to a common doom.¹¹⁷

Observing the world’s contradictions often leads to the conclusion that God, at best, is remote and indifferent. James observes that many people fall into pessimism and melancholy not out of a rejection of God, but out of frustration in trying to find evidence of Him in nature. The traditional teaching that nature is a perfect representation of God, says James, is the root of the problem. He explains that melancholy is especially epidemic in his own time because science is constantly revealing the disunity and dysfunction of nature, making the defence of a God who created it more and more difficult. We are left instead

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

with this “death-in-life paradox” and “melancholy-breeding puzzle,” as we look to the universe and see confusion rather than Creation.¹¹⁸

Next, James explores ways to make sense of this confusion, beginning with the nonreligious answer. For this kind of cure for melancholy, having no God is no problem. In fact, it is a relief: the extremes of good and evil are lessened, and day-to-day living becomes the greatest concern. For the suicidal, often “instinctive springs of vitality [well up] that respond healthily when the burden of metaphysical and infinite responsibility rolls off. The certainty that you now *may* step out of life whenever you please . . . is itself an immense relief.”¹¹⁹ With the threat of hell and damnation aside, a melancholic or suicidal person may very well continue on living just out of “vital curiosity,” just to see “what tomorrow’s newspaper will contain, or what the next postman will bring.”¹²⁰ This cure for melancholy seems to amount to the idea that nothing much matters, so you might as well live. At this point in the paper, James’s message seems to fit Lears’s therapeutic characterization of James’s ideas: it has everything to do with comfort, relief, and simply getting through life one day at a time.

The second nonreligious answer to melancholy that James explores is more active than the first. This answer is not bothered by the evil we see in the world, nor does it turn away from hardship or suffering. People following this way of life make meaning by facing the dark side of the melancholic puzzle head-on. Says James, taking inspiration from Stoicism: “The sovereign source

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

of melancholy is repletion. Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us; our hour of triumph is what brings the void.” The dark side of experience adds “a keener zest” to life.¹²¹ Life’s worth lies in the struggle; the meaning lies in the melee. James gives example after example of lost wars and difficult battles, decimating diseases and widespread plagues, at the same time showing how these hardships drove nations to triumph over adversity. Ordinary people can take these lessons and live by them, too. James explains, taking an existentialist stance:

Life is worth living, no matter what it brings, if only such combats may be carried to successful terminations and one’s heel set on the tyrant’s throat. To the suicide, then, in his supposed world of multifarious and immoral nature, you can appeal—and appeal in the name of the very evils that make his heart sick there—to wait and see *his* part of the battle out.¹²²

For the nonreligious, life is worth living if you make it a fight. Suddenly the world is interesting again; it poses a challenge; it comes alive. As James closes the section, he summarizes by saying, “Thus, then, we see that mere instinctive curiosity, pugnacity, and honor may make life on a purely naturalistic basis seem worth living from day to day to men who have cast away all metaphysics.”¹²³ Even without promise of infinity or absolutes, human honor can combat life’s meaninglessness.

The nonreligious answer to ‘Is life worth living?’, however, has shortcomings. Life is a fight, but what are we fighting *for*? What makes the struggle worth the energy expended? The idea of struggle and triumph may appeal to our instincts, but fighting for subjective values or fleeting happiness

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 51

leaves us longing for deeper meaning. Enter the religious answer to ‘Is life worth living?’ While, naturalistically, life is worth living if you make it a fight, spiritually it is worth living if you simply believe. But first, James must define what he means by ‘believe.’ For his purposes, religion is the declaration that what we see—nature, the universe—is only “one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists.”¹²⁴ Then, he lays out the essence of his argument: belief in this unseen world is justified if this belief makes life worth living. And for many it does, says James: “The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a mere sign or vision, the external staging of a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal,—this bare assurance is to such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption.”¹²⁵ Belief invests the world with a greater meaning, a brighter light, and an existential glow that allow people to gain perspective on worldly troubles, fend off thoughts of suicide, and fight for what they believe. Life is a fight for the religious and nonreligious alike, but for the religious, the fight is even more vital. James explains:

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight,—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we . . . are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 61.

Suddenly, both the struggle and the triumph of life are invested with a new layer of meaning. Life is no longer an exercise in contemplation, it is an *active* exercise, one in which we can make a difference. We can better ourselves, but we can also better society. James describes our world as a “half-wild, half-saved universe,” a world in which life is not only worth living, but worth saving too.¹²⁷

In the end, this belief—and the question ‘Is life worth living?’ itself—is a matter of trust. We cannot know for sure whether the unseen world we place our belief in really exists. James knows he is in an age of acute uncertainty, and also knows his audience is still desperately searching for assurance. James, however, does not give them exactly what they want. He does not provide a traditional apologetic for religious belief, nor try to prove the spiritual world is there.

Instead, he tells them to embrace the uncertainty:

So far as man stands for anything, and is productive or originative at all, his entire vital function may be said to have dealt with maybes. Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment or textbook, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all.¹²⁸

Life is worth living—and only *can* be lived—upon a maybe. Uncertainty is not something to be afraid of; it is something to celebrate. Cultivate the mentality of ‘maybe,’ and the world opens up. According to James, we live in a world of “possibilities, not finished facts.”¹²⁹ These words foreshadow James’s later work in pragmatism, and also reflect the scientific method he used throughout

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* John Dewey and George Santayana take this idea of social responsibility further, drawing on James’s works.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

his life: observing, hypothesizing, and ultimately accepting the limits of knowledge. Life is unknowable, but that is also what makes it so hopeful. The nonreligious or religious answer aside, the whole question of “Is life worth living?” for James comes down to this: “Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create that fact.”¹³⁰ The mentality of maybe is the key to the exercise.

James’s thoughts on “Is Life Worth Living?” struck a chord with listeners and readers. His ideas provided a sharp contrast to the stark perspective of the times. James was the antithesis of Comte, Marx, Freud or even Lester Frank Ward or Herbert Spencer. James battled against scientific materialism, which decreed that everything unknown could one day be known by science. Science displaced religion and became the new idol to worship. James recognized that defending religion in a traditional way would no longer work in the 19th century, an age in which people are more concerned with “our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies” than God:

There were times when Leibnizes with their heads buried in monstrous wigs could compose Theodices, and when stall-fed officials of an established church could prove by the valves in the heart and the round ligament of the hip-joint the existence of a “Moral and Intelligent Contriver of the World.” But those times are past.¹³¹

The message of religion had not yet caught up with the modern, changing world. Instead, messages of scientific positivism and excessive intellectualism pervaded the learned world. Although this “new intellectual climate seemed to make all things possible,” at the same time, “the new materialism seemed to

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p, 43.

make them insignificant.”¹³² Darwinism “hung like a black cloud” over James’s generation, and science’s triumphant declaration that the universe had no transcendent purpose or order drove intellectuals and laymen alike to pessimism, scepticism, and melancholy. As James would say, the religious demands in their hearts were not being met, even if they did not realize those demands were still there. All they knew, as they sank into neurasthenia and despair, was that something was missing. As James noted, “Our science is a drop, our ignorance a sea.”¹³³ At the turn of the century, Americans received messages full of outward confidence, but the poverty, consumerism, and social dislocation of modern society still remained. In the end, the outwardly confident messages provided no definite, deeper answers.

James’s own answer was to revel in the fact there were no definitive answers. Instead, there was an ethical universe incredibly wide, expansive, and pluralistic, that all turned upon a ‘maybe.’ To some, it may have seemed like an evasive answer, but to most it was both a sensible and hopeful approach to the modern world that sorely needed both a new social policy and a new sense of self. James spoke directly to those, like him, who felt the collapse of “definitions of the self” in the modern era, where “the self seemed on the verge of dissolving into purposelessness and the ‘I’ of losing its determining power.”¹³⁴ He spoke to them, empowering them, telling them to *act*. James once again took a radical stance on religion with “Is Life Worth Living?”. His

¹³² Levinson, p. 27.

¹³³ “Is Life Worth Living?”, p. 54. Pascal, who James read, also developed this theme in the 17th century.

¹³⁴ Ramsey, p. 6.

interpretation was more than just philosophical, theoretical or dogmatic—it was deeply personal. His theory had nothing to do with refuting or accepting Darwinism or Higher Criticism; it had everything to do his concern for how religion affected the way people felt and lived every day. Increasingly, people went through life within grey areas and without guarantees. James reminded Americans that the very essence of belief—and indeed, of life itself—is uncertainty. There was no need to be afraid of it.

The Will to Believe

Roughly a year after writing “Is Life Worth Living?”, in April 1896, William James took a moment to sit down at his desk in Cambridge, pick up his pen and write a letter updating his brother on his activities. James opens the letter by saying, “Too busy to live almost, lectures and laboratories, dentists and dinner parties, so that I am much played out, but get off today for eight days’ vacation via New Haven, where I deliver an “address” tonight, to the Yale Philosophy Club.”¹³⁵ This address was none other than “The Will to Believe,” which would become his best-known essay.¹³⁶ Originally written to expand on the idea of the religious hypothesis introduced in “Is Life Worth Living?,” the new essay quickly took on a life of its own. In “The Will to Believe,” James

¹³⁵ William James to Henry James, April 17th 1896. Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James*, Vol. 2 (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), p. 34.

¹³⁶ James dedicated the collection of essays in which “The Will to Believe” appeared to his dear friend Charles Sanders Peirce. Perhaps it was just one small gesture of thanks to the man who originated the particular conception of truth, pragmatism, which James would build upon and make famous. Menand, p. 349

investigates the nature of faith, how we choose to believe what we do, and whether this choice is justified. Philosophers before him, such as William Clifford in “The Ethics of Belief,” had argued that belief without evidence is not only unjustified, it is downright immoral. James, by contrast, defends belief even in cases when you do not—or cannot—know the truth for sure. In his opening remarks, he describes his essay as a “justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.”¹³⁷ James saw this reasonable risk—this leap of faith—as the only way forward in the uncertain world that lay before him.

At the same time, James is not handing would-be believers a blank cheque, or acting as a ‘defender of the faith’ in the traditional sense. He defends belief without evidence only in certain, specific cases. James focuses on the right to believe when a hypothesis satisfies three criteria: it is live, forced, and momentous.¹³⁸ A ‘live’ hypothesis has some instinctual, passionate appeal to a thinker, versus a ‘dead’ hypothesis, which inspires only a shrug and indifference. He adds that “deadness and liveness in a hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker.”¹³⁹ Meaning, there are no absolute truths. One person may be conflicted when choosing between Hinduism and Islam, while they hold no appeal for his neighbour, who is considering the option of Christianity or agnosticism. A ‘forced’ option means that the thinker *must* make a decision; there is no way around it by choosing

¹³⁷ William James, “The Will to Believe,” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, p. 2.

¹³⁸ See Section I of the essay for James definitions. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

inaction or a third option. This is the case with belief—refraining from belief or unbelief is in itself a kind of belief. Finally, the hypothesis must be ‘momentous,’ a unique opportunity of life or death.

In these cases, relying solely on rational logic fails. James builds his argument towards a justification of religious faith by first giving examples of moral faith and faith in self-creating facts. James explores these in Section IX of “The Will to Believe,” after he has presented his preliminary definitions of hypotheses. First, he tackles morality:

Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solutions can’t wait for sensible proof . . . Science can tell us what exists; but to compare *worths*, both of what exists and what does not exist, we must consult not science, but . . . our heart. The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will.¹⁴⁰

James also adeptly points out that, for all Science’s talk of pure reason, even scientists look to their heart for the belief that “the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man.”¹⁴¹ Postivism cannot solve the question of morality, because “science says [solely that] things are; morality says some things are better than other things.”¹⁴² Beliefs, in this case in morality, are the building blocks of action, even in rationality.

Next, James explores a special category of faith, where “a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming.”¹⁴³ He gives the example of making friends, where faith in the affirmative answer to the question ‘Do you like me?’ allows a person to make that friend:

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

Whether you do [like me] or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you halfway, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show your trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have some objective evidence . . . ten to one your liking never comes.¹⁴⁴

Likewise, a man who believes he will get a promotion at work, and subsequently works harder, is well on his way to making that promotion a fact. Even a government or sports team operates on self-affirming faith that precedes empirical fact: all members share the faith that everyone else will work together to do their part. They owe their very *existence* to belief without prior proof. Waiting for intellectual proof equals losing out on life.

By Section X of "The Will to Believe," James makes clear that the biggest case of losing out on life is the outright denial of the religious question.

Although he does not make a case for one God or another, he staunchly defends the principle of the thing. Speaking in general, James explains that religion boils down to two affirmations: that "the best things are the more eternal things," and that "we are better off if we believe [the] first affirmation to be true."¹⁴⁵

Religion, says James, is the best example of what he calls a live, forced, momentous hypothesis. The religion hypothesis is momentous: James is no longer speaking about trivial human matters, but the broader eternal questions. Not only is the religious hypothesis momentous, a true matter of life and death, but it is also forced. Scepticism or agnosticism will not work to side-step the decision, because they in themselves are a form of choice—the choice to "risk

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

loss of truth [rather] than chance of error.”¹⁴⁶ James calls his readers to action, not allowing them to wait in positivistic passivity.

James aptly names this action a leap of faith, absolutely necessary in matters of belief. James recognized that the answers to the questions ‘Is there a God?’ ‘Is religion true?’ ‘Is there an immutable universe?’ are shrouded in as much mystery as they were thousands of years ago, and it is unlikely that definitive evidence will be unearthed tomorrow. In the meantime, James argues that both unbelief and belief are equal parts conjecture—neither a priest nor an atheist knows for *sure*—but, “in either case we *act*, taking our life in our hands.”¹⁴⁷ The scientific worldview and the religious worldview are equally uncertain, sinking in sand. As James ruminates on the question of belief versus unbelief, he notes:

When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and *wait*—acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true—till doomsday, . . . this command, I say seems to me the queerest idol in the philosophical cave.¹⁴⁸

To James, it is the ‘queerest idol’ because it prevents people from taking action to seek truth—the ultimate end of philosophy, but also of humanity. The religious hypothesis presents such a rich realm of possibilities that discounting it before seriously considering it does not make sense. Religion is powerful because, with it, “the universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou* . . . [and]

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁴⁸ In a footnote to this section, James adds that waiting on belief means disbelieving in the interim: “Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true.” pp. 29-30.

although in one sense we are passive portions of the universe, in another we show curious autonomy, as if we were small active centres on our own account.”¹⁴⁹ Without a leap of faith, one way or the other, we are just like the snarling, pessimistic man in James’s final example:

Just as a man who in the company of gentlemen made no advances . . . and believed no one’s word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn,—so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance.¹⁵⁰

The man may have cut out error, but he cut out any opportunity of life, too. James’s ultimate message is one of openness: openness to action, to choice, to belief or unbelief, and to life itself. James does not tell us the right choice, the right belief, the right way to live a life. Instead, he only defends the fact that there are options, and leaves the question open for each person to answer. Even so, there is no passivity or futility in his words. James’s ending may be uncertain, but we know with certainty that whatever we choose, whether belief or unbelief, it is a matter of the greatest importance.

While James tried to make his message clear in “The Will to Believe,” it confused many readers at the time, perhaps because his message was so unique. Whatever the reason, the essay became more infamous than accepted. This particularly distressed James, whose greatest concern was reaching the public and making philosophy accessible. To be misunderstood was a dreadful blow. Much of the backlash seemed to come from the title, as James lamented to

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

friends in his letters. Speaking about one critic's review, James says: "Miller's article seems to be based solely on my catchpenny little *title*. Where would he have been if I had called my article "a critique of pure faith" or words to that effect?"¹⁵¹ Five years later, it was clearly still bothering him, as he remarked that the essay "should have been called by the less unlucky title the *Right to Believe*."¹⁵² James was fighting an uphill battle against his contemporaries' snap-judgements and their perceptions of religion and science. Intellectuals did not want to hear a defence of belief when they had already written off religion. By painting scientific positivism and materialism in a negative light, James took a very unpopular stance in an age when science was king in academic circles. Challenging the ruling order of the time was a risk, but for James it was worth the reward. Ultimately, James proved himself to be a man many years ahead of his time. In the years since "The Will to Believe" was published, readers have caught up with his faith-defending yet pluralistic way of thinking.

"The Will to Believe" was the culmination of both "Is Life Worth Living?" and "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." All three works were connected by James's central idea that religion was not only worth defending, but also direly needed, even in an ever-changing world where religion seemed constantly threatened. While James was a 'defender of faith,' he was not a 'defender of *the* faith.' This distinction makes it difficult to fit him into the framework of religious history. His contribution does not lie in a certain dogma or particular creed. He never mentioned Jesus or the Buddha, rituals or

¹⁵¹ James to Henry Rutgers Marshall, February 7th 1899. *The Letters of William James Vol. 2*, p. 87.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

sacraments, Jerusalem or Mecca. He did not even try to confirm or deny that God existed at all. What he did do, however, was strengthen the very basis of all religions: faith without certainty, action with only trust. By strengthening the foundations of faith itself, he restored belief structures, preventing them from being lost in the quicksand of modernity. If James thought of life as a fight, his own personal cause was defending belief. Up until this point in his career, James had only defended religious faith in theory. His essays in the 1890s probed the philosophy of belief, but by 1901 he dove deeper, trading contemplation for empiricism. At that point, James finally “stopped speculating about the possibility of an invisible universe and went looking for one.”¹⁵³ His experimental efforts would become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and the result would be nothing less than a science of religions.

¹⁵³ Levinson, p. 32.

*Chapter Three:
The Works of William James, continued*

In summer 1898, James found himself buried in papers, essays, and research once again. Never one to be idle for long, he had just accepted the offer to give the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh that would later become *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He wrote to his friend François Pillon in June 1898, chatting about the Dreyfus affair, Zola’s “J’accuse,” as well as denouncing the newly declared Spanish-American War as a “hysterical stampede.”¹⁵⁴ In the very last paragraph, he finally shares his own news: “The year after next . . . begins a new year of absence from my college duties. I *may* spend it in Europe again. In any case, I shall hope to see you, for I am appointed to give the ‘Gifford Lectures’ at Edinburgh during 1899-1901—two courses of 10 each on the philosophy of religion. A great honor.”¹⁵⁵ As 1900 neared, James was at the height of his creative energy: teaching classes at Harvard, lecturing all around the Eastern seaboard, commenting on current issues, taking his first trip to California, and still taking the stairs two at a time, even in his fifties. Little did he know as he wrote Pillon that less than a month later he would have a profound religious experience of his own—one that would serve both as a signpost for the direction of the *Varieties* and also as a defining moment in his own life.

¹⁵⁴ Henry James, *The Letters of William James Vol. 2*, p. 73.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75. James would later have to postpone the lectures by a year because of heart trouble—see Richardson, p. 389.

Gaining Experience

On July 9th, James wrote his wife: “I have had an eventful 24 hours, and my hands are so stiff that my fingers can hardly hold the pen.”¹⁵⁶ He was writing from the Keene Valley in the Adirondack Mountains, where he often retreated to rest, read, and hike. Hiking was the focus of this trip in particular, as James thought the walking, fresh air, and scenery would ease his nervous fatigue and get the ideas flowing that he needed for the Gifford Lectures. One particular segment of this “wilderness trek,” however, stood out.¹⁵⁷ He wrote his wife about climbing Mount Mark the day before. After a long day of climbing with a guide and a group of friends, they settled down for the night on the side of the mountain, and all fell asleep—except for James. He struggled to describe what followed:

The sky swept itself clear of every trace of cloud or vapour, the wind entirely ceased, so that the fire-smoke rose straight up to heaven . . . the moon rose and hung above the scene before midnight, leaving only a few of the larger stars visible, and I got into a state of spiritual alertness of the most vivid description. The influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people round me . . . the thought of you and the children, dear Harry on the wave, the problem of the Edinburgh lectures, all fermented within me till it became a regular *Walpurgis Nacht*.¹⁵⁸ I spent a good deal of it in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checked play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 77.

¹⁵⁷ For a vivid, detailed recreation of this July in the Adirondacks, see Robertson, pp. 372-376

¹⁵⁸ James is referencing the German feast day of Saint Walpurga, a supernatural night when witches meet high up in the wild, wooded mountains.

¹⁵⁹ *Letters Vol. 2*, p. 76.

One can almost see James sitting on the side of that mountain, staring up at the stars. The experience was more than his mind could take in, and even as he shifts from direct reporting of the experience into philosophizing about it, he struggles to describe it:

The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it; its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay; its utter Americanism, and every sort of patriotic suggestiveness, and you, and my relation to you part and parcel of it all, and beaten up with it, so that memory and sensation all whirled inexplicably together . . . It was one of the happiest and loneliest nights of my existence, and I understand now what a poet is. He is a person who can feel the immense complexity of influences that I felt, and make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement. In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, a single boulder of *impression*. Doubtless in more ways than one, though, things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to it.¹⁶⁰

There is no doubt that this epiphany profoundly influenced James's exploration of mystical religion in *Varieties*, even if the experience was simply an impression. After ten years spent exploring the philosophical side of religion, here was James, feeling it for himself. It was overwhelming, intense, immense, and ultimately indescribable, but whatever it was that James felt on that mountainside, it convinced him that "real religion is religious feeling, and it can be experienced by anyone, even a sleepless wanderer in the gorgeous Adirondack night."¹⁶¹ The value of religious feeling over religious dogma would go on to form the entire foundation of James's Gifford Lectures. For James personally, the experience proved that even he, the self-described

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁶¹ Robertson, p. 375.

sceptical philosopher, could have a mystical experience. It let him glimpse the wider life above life and the deeper nature behind nature—it opened his heart.¹⁶²

If the Adirondack night could be seen as a bit of unintentional, serendipitous research for the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James was also busying himself with research of the traditional kind. One of his closest correspondents during this period – who provided both a sounding board for ideas and plethora of information – was Henry Rankin, a librarian and devout Christian who worked at the Mount Hermon School in Gill, Massachusetts.¹⁶³ Rankin would send James lists of books to consult, names of Christian mystics and religious writers, and his own explanations about Christianity. In turn, James would send his own ideas back, along with thanks for Rankin’s bibliographic knowledge of religious scholarship. More than any other of James’s correspondents, Rankin seemed able to bring James out, even though the two men had never even met. Rankin somehow succeeded in bringing James’s religious ideas to the forefront of his letters, from their usual place on the periphery.

Looking at the letters between the two men, readers can clearly see James’s thought developing as he prepared to write the *Varieties*. He talked about his own feelings about religion: “I am more interested in religion than

¹⁶² It also affected his heart not just emotionally, but physically: climbing down the mountain the next day, James insisted on carrying his own pack (his guide had carried it the day before) during the ten hour descent. It would prove too much for him. Although he did not realize it at the time, he had done permanent damage to his heart. It would trouble him for his remaining ten years and ultimately cause his death. *Letters Vol. 2*, p. 78.

¹⁶³ Robertson, p. 364; it is interesting to note that Mount Hermon School was founded by Dwight L. Moody, the Protestant evangelist mentioned in Chapter Two as part of the revivalist movement. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 34-35.

anything else, but with a strange shyness of closing my hand on any definite symbols that might be too restrictive. So I cannot call myself a Christian.”¹⁶⁴ A few months later, he discussed the chasm between religious history and religion itself: “Historical Christianity, with its ecclesiasticism and whatnot, stands between me and the imperishable strength and freshness of the original books.”¹⁶⁵ A year later, his mind was on conversion: “In the matter of conversion I am quite willing to believe that a new truth may be supernaturally revealed to a subject when he really *asks*. But I am sure that in many cases of conversion it is less a new truth than a new power gained over life by a truth always known.”¹⁶⁶ James’s reference to the new power gained over life sounds like his later pragmatic philosophy, in the sense that his version of conversion is concerned with actions and results. James goes on to further explain his ideas. Even three years before James’s talks in Edinburgh, they are remarkably close to how they ultimately appear in his Gifford Lectures:

It is a case of the conflict of two *self-systems* in a personality up to that time heterogeneously divided, but in which, after the conversion-crisis, the higher loves and powers come definitely to gain the upper-hand and expel the forces which up to that time had kept them down in the position of mere grumblers and protesters and agents of remorse and discontent. This broader view will cover an enormous number of cases *psychologically*, and leaves all the *religious importance* to the result which it has on any other theory.¹⁶⁷

Again, James’s pragmatism shines through: the religious importance of conversion lies not in the experience itself, but in what it allows you to *do*, who it allows you to become. The same is true for miracles. He says: “A miracle in

¹⁶⁴ James to Rankin, January 1896, qtd. in Robertson, p. 365.

¹⁶⁵ James to Rankin, June 1896, qtd. in *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ James to Rankin, February 1st 1897, *Letters Vol. 2*, p. 57.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

any case must be an expression of personal purpose, but the demon-purpose of antagonizing God and winning away his adherents has never yet taken hold of my imagination. I prefer an open mind of inquiry, first *about the facts*, in all these matters.”¹⁶⁸ For him, miracles could only be the work of a benevolent God, and he was determined to approach the subject empirically, focusing on the facts.

Method, subject matter, stances on religious philosophy: all are present in James’s letters in the years leading up to the Gifford Lectures. They provide an insight into the state of mind of the man who wrote one of the most influential, reverent books in religious studies, yet at the same time, who wrote to Rankin in 1897, saying, “although religion is the great interest of my life, I am rather hopelessly non-evangelical, and take the whole thing too impersonally.”¹⁶⁹ Of course, that changed a year later, in 1898, when James finally felt the divine and the metaphysical side of life personally, on a quiet mountainside deep in the Adirondacks.

Through introspection, correspondence, researching, and divine intervention, James gained the experience he needed to write Gifford Lectures in the five years between *The Will to Believe* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Perhaps the best snapshot of his outlook at the end of this period of reflection appears in a letter to his childhood friend Fanny Morse in 1900, where James expresses his intellectual—and spiritual—vision for the *Varieties*:

The problem I have set myself is a hard one: *first*, to defend (against all the prejudices of my “class”) “experience” against “philosophy” as being

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

the real backbone of the world's religious life—I mean prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world's meaning; and *second*, to make the hearer or the reader believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function.¹⁷⁰

Although he had only written two and a half lectures by the time he wrote to Fanny, James still had a clear image of his end product, and of what message, ultimately, he wanted to convey to society. To believers, he wanted to show religion stripped of its institutions but strengthened by its experiences; to non-believers, he wanted to place philosophic reason aside and instead show religion's continuing power and relevance through experience; to everyone in-between, he wanted to show religion in a way they perhaps had not seen before. Above all, James continued the work he began in *Will to Believe*, arguing that believing and experiencing religion was still a valid option, even in the 20th century. As for James himself, he had this to say, with his trademark self-confidence: “[It is] a task well-nigh impossible, I fear, and in which I shall fail; but to attempt it is *my* religious act.”¹⁷¹ The important thing, for James, was to try.

Varieties: Year One

James began his first set of Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh on May 16th, 1901. The day before, he wrote nervously in a letter: “I feel a cake of ice.” At

¹⁷⁰ James to Frances R. Morse, April 12th 1900, in *ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

the same time, however, finally beginning them, he wrote, felt like “real life beginning once more.”¹⁷² He felt even better after his first lecture set attendance records: “I have made my plunge and the foregoing chill has given place to the warm reaction. The audience was more numerous than had been expected, some 250, and exceedingly sympathetic . . . Previous Gifford lectures have had audiences beginning with 60 and dwindling to 15.”¹⁷³ Perhaps the Scots crowding the hall to hear James speak were both curious and worried about the future of religion as they knew it, just like their American counterparts. Perhaps they wondered: is religion still relevant amidst modernity? In this new world, what does it even look like? Should Christianity be liberal? Social? Evangelical? Are there alternatives to faith beyond the mainstream? James would give those listeners answers, although perhaps not quite the ones they were expecting.

His listeners did not hear much rationalizing or philosophizing; instead, they heard carefully selected first-hand accounts of religious experience. Neither did they hear much about institutions or history; instead, they heard about personal connections with the divine. Suddenly, religion—specifically, Christianity—was alive again. James gave two sets of Gifford Lectures one year apart, and he bombarded his audience with new ways of looking at faith. In the first, he dealt with definitions of religion, the reality of the unseen, ‘healthy-mindedness’ versus ‘sick souls,’ and conversion. In the second, he focused on saintliness, mysticism, prayer, and the religious philosophy he had introduced in

¹⁷² James to Frances R. Morse, May 15th 1901, in *ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁷³ James to Frances R. Morse, May 17th and 30th 1901, in *ibid.*, pp. 145, 147.

The Will to Believe and Other Essays. If his subject matter of sick souls and mysticism was foreign to his listeners, at least the way he presented it was familiar—the progression of James’s lectures through melancholy souls to conversion and finally to saintliness stays faithful to his traditional Protestant roots and the salvation narrative with which any Christian is familiar.¹⁷⁴

The recognizable order helped listeners follow James as he marches on into uncharted territory. *Varieties* does not examine Sunday-school salvation or even Sunday-morning religion at all. James is concerned with the other six days. Those are the days that revealed the human condition, the complexities of living, the choices we face, and the actions we take. And, even more occasionally, those are the days that open a direct line to heaven, hold a mystical moment, or give a divine impression far away from a church pew. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a study of “religion in the vital sense.”¹⁷⁵ And that includes both senses of ‘vital’: religion’s essential parts, but also its effect on living. James believed that only a study of personal, experiential religion—apart from politics, hierarchy, and history—can explain how religion has the power to render us once lost, then found; selfish, then selfless; rudderless, then anchored.

¹⁷⁴ For more discussion of the influence of liberal Protestantism on James’s take on religion in *Varieties*, see David Hollinger, “Damned for God’s Glory: William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture,” in Wayne Proudfoot, ed., *William James and a Science of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 9-29.

¹⁷⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), p. 466.

But before he can get anywhere near ‘lost then found,’ James has to lay down the groundwork. Wisely, he starts at the beginning, by defining religion itself:

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine . . . [Religion is] the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in adjusting ourselves thereto.¹⁷⁶

James sets out no creed, no dogma, not even a name for the divine—this is religion at its most essential. James himself admits that his definition is enormously broad and sweepingly general. Still, it lays out James’s unique take on religion, emphasizing the personal and experiential. “Churches,” says James, “live at second-hand upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their personal communion with the divine.”¹⁷⁷ Studying personal religion, therefore, gets to the heart of the matter on the question of religion. James explains that worship, sacrifice, priests, and sacraments are simply outgrowths of an original, individual experience of God. Religion’s institutional branch concentrates mainly on tradition and ritual, concerning itself with the business of staying in God’s good books. The personal branch, on the other hand, concerns itself with, as James says, “the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness.”¹⁷⁸ For James, being right with God is still a focus of personal religion, but it is a direct dialogue with God, not a conversation with intermediaries. The relationship

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 53.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

“goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker.”¹⁷⁹ Although Protestantism had begun on this premise, by James’s time its institutions had grown large enough that the trappings of the Church often overshadowed the hearts of the faithful. Religion at its most fundamental—and, James would argue, at its most honest—operates below institutions and above theology; it works within individuals and in practice.

Much of James’s first three lectures attempt to get his audience to simply *consider* religion as he had defined it. This clearly reflects the intellectual atmosphere in 1901, when increasing numbers of his listeners and readers—especially intellectuals like James—were ready to write off religion, or at least de-personalize it. Perhaps they still went to Sunday morning service, out of tradition or family obligation, but God seemed far away from the sermon they heard. The idea that the presence of the divine could overcome worshippers, that they could directly feel God, or that they could enter into a personal communion with the divine must have seemed either completely alien, at best, or totally preposterous, at worst to his listeners, many of them intellectuals.¹⁸⁰ To many, scientific positivism, biblical criticism, and rational philosophy had eroded faith’s viability, and even practicality, at the turn of the century. James’s multiple defences in the first three Gifford Lectures provide insight into the historical context in which James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ James’s openness to mysticism is often at odds with the more ordered, traditional Christianity of his listeners. Judging from the tone of James’s lectures, he is clearly fighting an uphill battle against his audience’s preconceptions. As he says near the end of his lectures on conversion, “Some of you, I feel sure, . . . dismiss [the whole subject of conversion] with a pitying smile at so much ‘hysterics.’” *Ibid.*, p. 257.

By examining the ideas James felt he needed to defend against, historians can form a clearer picture of the intellectual atmosphere at the time.

James confronts the problems of Higher Criticism, medical materialism, nihilism, and excessive rationalism head-on. He deals with modern prejudices arising from biblical criticism by pointing out that spiritual value can exist independently from historical exigencies—in other words, independently from its origins.¹⁸¹ Even if Jesus or the Buddha were a result of a particular historical context, does that make their teachings any less meaningful? James argues it does not. He says that the Bible, for example, may well be “a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate,” even though it contains what he calls “errors and passions and deliberate human composition.”¹⁸² Likewise, James refutes medical materialism, which reduces the spiritual value of religious claims—especially mystical experiences—by pointing to earthly influences or physical ailments. Putting his background knowledge in physiology to good use, he comments:

Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as a hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.¹⁸³

For James, a person does not have to be a Joan of Arc hearing voices to fall prey to medical materialism as an explanation for their experiences. Everyday feelings of ordinary people are also affected by reductionism, according to James: “Alfred believes in immortality so strongly because his temperament is

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁸² *Ibid.* p. 5.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

so emotional. Fanny's extraordinary conscientiousness is merely a matter of over-instigated nerves. William's melancholy about the universe is due to bad digestion."¹⁸⁴ James also recognizes the growing trend among his contemporaries to see religion as simply sexual perversion—hysterical nuns 'marry' Christ and missionaries are so dedicated because they lacked parental love.¹⁸⁵ In this sense, James is not a Freudian. He disagrees completely with the idea behind medical materialism that if something comes from the body, it has no worth spiritually. Nonsense, says James, because ultimately everything arises from bodily causes, even all our thoughts. Why else would we call them a 'brainwave'? We need wholly different criteria, beyond the physical, to judge religious claims. James urges his listeners to suspend judgement until they have heard the whole story.

James was fighting an uphill battle against the prevailing philosophies of his day. These included not only his arch nemesis—absolute idealism—but also nihilism and rationalism, which threatened to envelop everything in meaninglessness. Schopenhauer's idea that all life is an illusion and Nietzsche's insistence that God is dead failed to convince James. Something is missing for James: they presume to assert the finiteness of people's knowledge, yet in a universe of infinite possibilities.¹⁸⁶ Often this appears to be because of their faith in humanism and naturalism. Nietzsche and Schopenhauer looked to

¹⁸⁴ One cannot help but wonder if James was self-deprecatingly referring to his own neurasthenic self with his final namesake example. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ James, the pluralist, is also not impressed with their immediate condemnation of religion with "a curse [and] a jest." He reveals his hand even further when he describes their writings as reminding him of "the sick shriekings of dying rats." *Ibid.*, p. 38.

humanistic naturalism as a supreme authority, offering all of the answers without God, while many of James's contemporaries turned to science and rationalism. James argues instead that these philosophic stances are neither useful to defend religion nor defend against it. Religion is in another category, beyond logic and proof. It is the "unseen order" that James defined earlier; the idea, as he put it, that our physical universe "swims . . . in a higher universe of abstract ideas, that lend it its significance."¹⁸⁷ It is a matter beyond proof and disproof. Perhaps that is why rationalistic arguments for God based on nature were inadequate by James's time. Speaking to this inadequacy, he asserts that "to-day [they do] 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 . . . he is nevermore that mere external inventor of 'contrivances.'"¹⁸⁸ Perhaps that is why evolution—and denominations subsequently trying to accommodate it—dealt such a devastating blow to faith. Religion, long supported by rationalism, needed to find an entirely new apologetic system.¹⁸⁹ Most people know rationalism's inadequacy instinctively when it comes to spiritual matters, as James points out:

If we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial. It is the part that has the *prestige* undoubtedly . . . it can challenge you for proofs, and chop

¹⁸⁷ James adds, "As time space, and the ether soak through all things, [so do] abstract and essential goodness, beauty, strength, significance, [and] justice." *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁸⁹ James Turner details theological responses to modernity in his *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

logic, and put you down with words. But it will fail to convince or convert you all the same.¹⁹⁰

For James, the only thing that can truly convince you of God's existence is not teleology or utilitarianism, but a direct religious experience itself.

With these preliminary lectures now complete, James is finally ready to dive into his explorations of religious experience. He shifts from examining contemporary ideas of intellectuals to experiences of individuals; he moves away from citing theory and philosophy and towards documenting feelings and encounters. First, he takes a deeper look at the two types of religious moods: healthy- and sick-mindedness. Using quotes from the quintessential optimist Walt Whitman, as well as Unitarians and Catholics, James demonstrates that one kind of personal religious outlook is wholly happy. If someone is healthy-minded, their "soul is of this sky-blue tint, whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions, 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."¹⁹¹ For James, a healthy-minded soul is innocent, optimistic, and without the weight of worry. This is his 'once-born' soul. James sees this outlook as incredibly appealing to those who, by 1900, balk at the "harshness and irrationality of the orthodox Christian scheme."¹⁹² James points to the Mind-Cure movement, liberal Christianity, and popular evolutionism as examples of this healthy-minded tendency. The Mind-Cure movement

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

emphasized faith healing based on the idea that sin—and sickness—is simply an illusion to be corrected.¹⁹³ Clearly the denial of evil in the world represented an optimistic outlook. Similarly, evolutionism based itself on a trajectory of progress and advancement, and liberal theology distanced itself from sin, fire, and brimstone:

The advance of liberalism, so-called, in Christianity, during the past fifty years, may be fairly called a victory of healthy-mindedness within the church over the . . . old hell-fire theology . . . We have 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 the depravity of man.¹⁹⁴

James saw a direct relationship in his own time between healthy-mindedness and modern liberal theology. Of course, not all liberal Christians minimized sin. In fact, many pointed to depravity of the modern world that pursued progress at the cost of hunger, poverty, and exploitation. But for his own purposes, James concentrates on the extremely optimistic version of the healthy-minded outlook. For many, healthy-mindedness felt like a breath of fresh air from a clear blue sky. But for James, trading damnation for daises represented a dead end. If everything is fine and there are no rain clouds on the horizon, there is also no ‘dark night of the soul,’ no desperate cry to God—and no conversion.

To find the more comprehensive outlook on life, James turns to what he calls ‘sick souls.’ James’s background as a psychologist allows him to appreciate the complexities of the human condition, and his own lifelong struggles with melancholy make the cries of the sick souls hit home. They are

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 94. See also Ramsay, p. 91.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

the people that are acutely aware of the evil in the world; they are the ones that fall prey to melancholy; they are the ones that have “drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste.”¹⁹⁵ But precisely because of their internal conflict, they are also the ones who have the most profound conversion experiences. These are the ‘twice-born’ people, who are born again “into a universe two stories deep”: they integrate both the world’s sadness and its hope into their new faith, reflecting the nuances of the world around them.¹⁹⁶ They recognize that life is more complex than the healthy souls’ blue sky. The reality of death and loss always looms. James explains:

This sadness lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy. Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet . . . 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 . . . but it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes . . . because the evil facts that [healthy-mindedness] 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.¹⁹⁷

James’s take on melancholy and optimism sounds remarkably like his conclusion ten years before, in *Is Life Worth Living?*. James favours the ‘sick soul’ outlook because he too feels the need for more—the physical world is not enough, a wider spiritual universe of meaning is needed.

James’s lectures on the sick soul are suitably dark—the sick souls, after all, are the ones that cannot ignore the pain, death, and loss inherent in life. For the same reason, the lectures are also some of his most powerful. The lectures

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

contain quotation after quotation from individuals at their most despondent. It is a roll-call of melancholy. Listeners hear from Goethe, Robert Louis Stevenson, the Stoics, the Epicureans, a Catholic priest, an asylum patient, Tolstoy, John Bunyan, and Henry Alline, as well as others. All those people whose voices James calls forward for a fresh hearing are made heartsick by the realization of sin or the fleeting nature of our physical world and everything in it. One unassuming French correspondent, however, is the most interesting. Under the guise of the unnamed French writer, James presents his own story of despondency from thirty years before, unbeknownst to his audience.¹⁹⁸ In his own case, panic fear was what gripped his sick soul:

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches . . . with his knees drawn up against his chin . . . He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him . . . It was as if something hitherto solid in my breast gave way entirely, and I became a man of quivering fear . . . with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before.¹⁹⁹

In that moment, James crumbled and fell, swallowed down deep into the darkness of spiritual quicksand, into meaninglessness and futility. James

¹⁹⁸ James reveals himself as the “French Correspondent” a few years later in private correspondence. Levinson, p. 110; Richardson, p. 399; Perry, pp. 120, 254, 363.

¹⁹⁹ One clue to readers that this is in fact James speaking lies in a footnote on the next page, where he compares the experience in the above quote to his father’s own dark night of the soul a generation before. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 160-161.

eventually overcame his ‘panic fear’ by clinging to comforting scripture verses. His direct encounter with metaphysical fear and religious pessimism, like his mystical encounter that night in the Adirondacks, clearly helped James gain insight into the depths of religious experience. First-hand experience is more powerful than second-hand testimony, and what’s more, it makes that second-hand testimony suddenly ring true. James knew exactly what Tolstoy meant when he said “something had broken within me” and when Bunyan exclaimed that “[I am] a terror to myself.”²⁰⁰ James understood, and conveyed it so powerfully to his audience because he had been there himself. James said simply, “Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help!”²⁰¹ Meaninglessness is inevitable and impossible to deal with alone. The very essence of the problem is that we *need* God; we fail by ourselves; we are lost on our own. With healthy-mindedness and sick souls, James returns to the idea, introduced in *Is Life Worth Living?*, that the question of whether to live our lives optimistically or pessimistically is a religious one. Having hope necessitates having something to hope for, an ultimate end, or an “eternal moral order.”²⁰² James saw in his own day the danger of nothingness posed by scientific positivism:

Place round [us] on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to an anxious trembling.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153, 158.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

Was that the picture of progress for modernity? While James did not endeavour to make his listeners' decisions for them, he did urge them to recognize the implications of irreligion for their morality and overall way of life. Without finding refuge in religious investigations, James's own trembling fear would have been unending. The story of sick souls demonstrate that often religious experience is a heart's cry—equally as often, it is answered by a cry of rebirth.

A rebirth into a new life is James's metaphor of choice for conversion, his next topic in the *Varieties*. James sees conversion as the focal point around which all his concepts about religion revolve: the once-born healthy-minded, the twice-born sick souls, the divided self, its ultimate reunification, and the after-effects of sainthood. He sees conversion as the one key experience for religious life. But for such a crucial experience, it must have seemed far away from a conventional one to his ordinary church-going listeners. James knew that the word 'conversion' had evangelical and mystical connotations, and might have conjured up images of Pentecostals or Spiritualists hearing voices, seeing visions, and being overcome with the divine. And while James cites powerful examples like these—he opens the chapter, for instance, with the story of a man who saw Jesus, arms spread open, saying simply 'Come'—he also broadens the definition of conversion beyond the dramatic. James saw conversion pragmatically: if you are 'converted' in a religious sense, it simply means you act differently, according to a set of more eternal values. James also acknowledges that conversion can happen in a nonreligious sense, too. He explains, "For example, the new birth may be away from religion into

incredulity; or it may be from moral scrupulosity into freedom and licence; or it may be produced by the irruption into the individual's life of some new stimulus or passion."²⁰⁴ Conversion is a process of extreme change, a complete shift in all of these cases, although the shift *to* and the shift *from* may be completely different in each. Conversion also often happens as a natural progression from adolescence to adulthood, as a person's worldview is transformed from immaturity to maturity. For James purposes in the *Varieties*, he concentrates on religious conversion. James explains further: "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 centre of his energy."²⁰⁵ Religious ideas, and the need to *act* upon them, are now the most important thing to the life of the converted. Conversion is more than hearing voices or seeing visions—the sea change is a moral one.

Turning to James's lectures on saintliness, they are largely descriptive, relying on primary sources written by the converted. They also showcase his background in psychology. Perhaps they carry a more scientific tone because this is one area—unlike that of sick souls or mysticism—that he has not experienced himself. He describes the three-step conversion process: first, an acute awareness of sin; second, emotional exhaustion and indifference towards the world; third, a miracle moment. This moment can happen two ways: the gradual, volitional conversion versus the sudden, self-surrender kind. He uses the analogy of trying to remember a forgotten name to explain:

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-6, 199.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

Usually you help the recall by working for it, by mentally running over the places, persons, and things with which the word was connected. But sometimes this effort fails: you feel then as if the harder you tried the less hope there would be, as though the name were *jammed* . . . Give up that effort entirely; think of something altogether different, and in half an hour the lost name comes sauntering into your mind . . . Some hidden process was started in you by the effort, which went on after the effort ceased, and made the result come as if it came spontaneously.²⁰⁶

James is referring at the end of this quote to the subconscious, discovered in 1886, which James saw as one of the most important psychological discoveries for religious studies. The “subliminal self” could help explain humanity’s deeper spiritual experience in a physical world—perhaps the point where God could enter into communion with an individual. Some people can practice religion all their lives, working diligently away at cultivating goodness, humility, charity, without having an exact moment where everything changes, while others can pinpoint the exact moment they are ‘saved.’ Conversion is a process by which we get results, and sometimes these results come gradually or suddenly, intentionally or unintentionally.²⁰⁷ It all depends, says James, on an individual’s mental make-up. Conversion as a possibility is not only affected by the mind, but also the times. James observed a new philosophic phenomenon happening around him:

Some persons, for instance, never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted . . .the pessimistic and materialistic beliefs, for example, within which so many good souls, who in former times would have freely indulged their religious propensities, find themselves nowadays, as it were, frozen; or the agnostic vetoes upon faith as something weak and shameful, under which so many of us to-day lie

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 233, 242.

²⁰⁷ James’s contemporary, Charles Grandison Finney, took a similar pragmatic stance on conversion, although unlike James, Finney was a revivalist theologian. He also believed that a conversion experience could be precipitated by certain planned measures. See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp. 31-35, 237.

cowering, afraid to use our instincts.²⁰⁸

By the time James spoke to his audience in 1901, for many the idea of dramatic conversion was simply not an intellectual possibility anymore. The times had made up their minds.

James presents a very psychological perspective on conversion without diminishing its spiritual worth. Some people may be more naturally predisposed, perhaps because of an emotional temperament or an active subconscious, to having a sudden conversion or having visions or even feeling the divine at all. But the results of conversion are separate from its origins—in other words, James seeks to judge conversion by its fruits, not by its roots. And its fruits are many. He saves discussing most of them until his lectures on saintliness in the second set of Gifford Lectures a year later, for now only describing the immediate after-effects of conversion. One of the most succinct passages on conversion's effect comes from Billy Bray, an English evangelist, whom James quotes:

I can't help but praising the Lord. As I go along the street, I lift up one foot, and it seems to say 'Glory'; and I lift up the other, and it seems to say 'Amen'; and so they keep up like that all the time I am walking.²⁰⁹

The converted, previously bankrupt in melancholy, are now full to the brim with wonder at the world, new truths, and “spiritual vitality . . . in which impossible things have become possible.”²¹⁰ They are full of “joyous conviction” and “the

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

²¹⁰ It is worth noting that the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson, was so inspired by James's account of conversion and its after-effects that he modeled AA after the insights contained in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. *Ibid.*, p. 241; Richardson, p. 405.

assurance that all is well with one.”²¹¹ But this is no blue-sky faith. Unlike the healthy-minded, the converted know that darkness and melancholy still exist and will rear their heads again. But, thanks to the power of their direct experience of the divine, they know they will always triumph over meaninglessness. For James, this state of assurance is the most powerful after-effect of conversion—it is the seat of faith itself.

Speaking through Bray, Tolstoy, Bunyan, Alline, and many others, James demonstrates that no matter how much a religious believer’s world may change—whether it be Gilded Age capitalism, technology, waves of immigration, and all the rest—they have certainty in God.²¹² The struggles are still there, but the converted have the new-found strength they need to deal with them. James’s student Ralph Barton Perry explains this point by separating faith into two categories: “fighting faith” and “comforting faith.”²¹³ The fighting faith stimulates while the comforting faith assures, and both work together to drive a person to act. It is certainly more than therapeutic release. With each successive first-hand account James provides, he demonstrates that the assurance of the peace of God can counter any worldly uncertainty. James believes this certainty is religion’s ultimate power. It may still be belief without guarantee, but it fills them with assurance, peace and certainty instead of doubt, worry and fear, even through periodic and inevitable relapses.²¹⁴ This solid, unshifting permanent

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Billy Bray, qtd. in *ibid.*, p. 248.

²¹³ Perry, p. 254.

²¹⁴ “That [the conversion experience] should for even a short time show a human being what the high-water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance,—an importance that backsliding cannot diminish.” *Ibid.*, p. 257.

foundation allows them to act, to change, to keep going through the quicksand even when all seems lost. On that note, James closes his first half of the Gifford Lectures.

James writes to his librarian friend and religious correspondent, Henry Rankin, a few days later. The letter captures James's feelings as he finishes the first set of lectures in Edinburgh. He says, "Now, at the end of this first course, I feel my "matter" taking firmer shape." He continues by saying,

I believe myself to be (probably) permanently incapable of believing the Christian scheme of vicarious salvation . . . The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual . . . All theologies and ecclesiasticisms are secondary growths super-imposed . . . [Mystical experiences] belong to a religion deeper, and more vital and practical, than that which the intellect inhabits. For this they are also indestructible by intellectual arguments and criticisms . . . The impressions and impulsions and emotions and excitements which we receive [from the mystical, wider sphere of life] help us to live, they found an invincible assurance of a world beyond the sense, they melt our hearts and communicate significance and value to everything and make us happy . . . Religion in this way is absolutely indestructible.²¹⁵

James's tone is triumphant; he believes the religious life has an essential, eternal core. He, himself incapable of belief in traditional Christianity, is able as a thinker to strip away the outer layer of religion, and finds at its core a dynamic, active relationship between human beings and a larger mystical universe—something in which he can indeed believe. He can see, beyond doubt, that "Something, not our immediate self, does act on our life!" This is his form of religious assurance, and the key to the genius of his thought. His faith is not self-righteous assurance, because we as humans can never know it all. His faith, like all belief, is powered by 'probably' and 'maybe,' and in the end his

²¹⁵ William James to Henry Rankin, June 16th 1901, *Letters Vol. 2*, pp. 149-150.

assurance is not altogether dissimilar from the peace and grace felt by the figures he quotes. With this inspiration, in August 1901, James sails from Edinburgh to Boston, and finally returns home again.

Varieties: Year Two

A year later, in 1902, James finds himself back in Edinburgh. He picks up the story where he left off, moving on to the long-term after-effects of conversion: saintliness.²¹⁶ James forms a bridge between conversion and saintliness by explaining that the peace, assurance, and elation caused by conversion—in short, an answer ‘Yes, yes!’ to the question ‘Help, help!’—in turn causes changes in how people act, and transforms them into saints. James separates the new traits into the categories of asceticism, strength of soul, purity, and charity.²¹⁷ Some fall easier on listeners’ ears than others—charity and brotherly love, for example, is not such a controversial topic. It may be hard to pin down and describe, but everyone can agree that the power of ‘love your enemy,’ if followed, “might conceivably transform the world.”²¹⁸ The concepts of asceticism and obedience, however, seemed to many at the turn of the century like a bizarre relic of the primitive past.²¹⁹ James acknowledges his contemporary context when he notes that “the secular life of our twentieth

²¹⁶ When James refers to ‘saints’ or ‘saintliness,’ he does not use it in the usual sense. To James, anyone who has experienced a conversion experience is a ‘saint,’ not simply those who have been canonized.

²¹⁷ *Varieties*, pp. 273-274.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 283

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 310, 297.

century opens with [obedience] held in no high esteem. The duty of the individual to determine his own conduct [seems, on the contrary] to be one of our best rooted contemporary Protestant social ideals.”²²⁰ In regard to asceticism, he says, “A strange moral transformation has within the past century swept over our Western world. We no longer think that we are called on to face physical pain with equanimity . . . Where to seek the easy and the pleasant seems instinctive.”²²¹ Rather than religion being an easy way out or a comforting remedy, saintliness and asceticism stood as a challenge to the weightlessness of modern excess.²²² While he agrees that asceticism can be taken too far, flagellations and self-denial considered, asceticism’s courage in the face of pain and discomfort appeals to his vision of a morally strenuous life.

The next step in James’s study of saintliness is exploring virtues in excess, when religious experience is taken too far. He gives the examples of moral anger, fanaticism, zealous purity, and oppressive uniformity, once again drawing illustrations from the enormous catalogue of religious writings he has collected. It is clear that saints are not infallible, especially when their “intellectual outlook is narrow” or rigid.²²³ This picture of the converted is closer to Nietzsche’s ‘sickly saint’ than to brotherly love, and James acknowledges this. Still, he argues that leading a saintly life has pragmatic value, and it is not simply “mouldiness and morbidness” that drive people to

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

²²² T. J. Jackson Lears explores this idea in *No Place of Grace*, p. 45.

²²³ For James’s discussion of saintly excesses, see *ibid.*, pp. 342-350.

practice poverty, purity, and love.²²⁴ Saints may not seem like Nietzsche's 'superman,' but in fact, they are the most vital people of all. At heart, they are men and women of *action*. Loving, caring, believing—none of these are passive states, they are strong actions.

James is not arguing that saints are valuable because what they believe is true, he is arguing that what they believe is worthy of being held true precisely because it produces useful results. Test saintliness by common sense, test it empirically, test it in practice, James urges. Do that, and one will soon find that "the saintly group of qualities is indispensable to the world's welfare."²²⁵ To his listeners, this line of reasoning must have sounded foreign, even if its ultimate conclusion did not. The ultimate worth of saints lies in their ability to give life a religious vision, to become "authors of goodness" and a "creative social force."²²⁶ James offers a glimpse of the world without this vision:

Were there no one prompt to help a brother first, and find out afterwards whether he were worthy; no one willing to drown his private wrongs in pity for the wronger's person; no one ready to be duped many a time rather than live always on suspicion; no one glad to treat individuals passionately and impulsively rather than by general rules of prudence; the world would be an infinitely worse place now than it is to live in. The tender grace, not of a day that is dead, but of a day yet to be born somehow, with the golden rule grown natural, would be cut out from the perspective of our imaginations.²²⁷

Saints, their actions, and their beliefs represent a hopeful future, governed by not by greed but by goodness. James concludes by saying that the saints—those

²²⁴ "For Nietzsche the saint represents little but sneakingness and slavishness. He is the sophisticated invalid, the degenerate par excellence, the man of insufficient vitality." *Ibid.*, pp. 372-373.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

with the will to believe and the courage to act—“may, with their extravagances of tenderness, be prophetic.”²²⁸ James clearly has faith in those that have faith. Hiding in his comments on the value of saintliness is also a biting critique of the Gilded Age. Condemning the materialism of modern churches and modern life, he argues that saintly asceticism and poverty can teach the Sunday-morning Christian and the agnostic layman about a morally strenuous life:

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. If he does not join the general scramble and pant with the money-making street, we deem him spiritless and lacking in ambition . . . When we of the so-called better classes are scared as men were never scared in history at material ugliness and hardship; when we put off marriage until our house can be artistic, and quake at the thought of having a child without a bank account and doomed to manual labor, it is time for thinking men to protest against so unmanly and irreligious a state of opinion.²²⁹

This is a case where religious experience and social action intersect—or collide, more accurately. James urged his listeners to look up from their chequebooks and see the wider world, even in the face of worldly consequences: “Our stocks might fall, our hopes of promotion vanish, our salaries stop, our club doors close in our faces; yet, while we lived, we would imperturbably bear witness to the spirit, and our example would help to set free our generation.”²³⁰ As James said previously, religious experience has to be judged by its fruits, not its roots; saintliness is a case where these fruits are clear. Conversion, in the end, drives people to live differently and to see their world differently. Religious vision, to James, always has a social vision. Religion’s social vision could serve as an antidote to morally moribund modernity and all its inherent problems: wealth

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 368

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

inequality, urban restlessness, and indifference towards fellow men. Success as a saint may be uncertain, but it is a risk worth taking—just as James had concluded about belief itself in “The Will to Believe” ten years earlier.²³¹ He told his listeners not to be afraid of uncertainty if it meant a wider gain to a larger world of experience.

James explores the potential of that wider world of experience in his lectures on mysticism. Mysticism, to James, is the very seat of personal experience; the absolute core of religious feeling. In these lectures, James finally discusses many of the points he has put off throughout his talks on the reality of the unseen, healthy- and sick-mindedness, conversion, and saintliness, viewing the mysticism lectures as the time for all things to come together. Although the amount of time he spends on mysticism is surprisingly short, it is “the summit of the book.”²³² James first has to get past the potential prejudices of his audience: “The words ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical’ are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in facts or logic.”²³³ On the contrary, says James: mysticism has both scientific and spiritual worth. In the two mysticism lectures, he tries to both describe mysticism and evaluate its claim on truth—neither an easy task.

He starts by laying down a more sympathetic definition for mysticism, using four main characteristics. First is its “ineffability”: mysticism “defies expression” and must be “directly experienced” in order to be understood,

²³¹ Ramsay, p. 101.

²³² Richardson, p. 413.

²³³ *Varieties*, pp. 379-380.

because mystic states are more like “states of feeling than states of intellect.”²³⁴ Second, mysticism is “noetic”: mystic states may be states of feeling, but they also somehow feel like “states of knowledge” and “states of insight” into truth deeper than states of intellect.²³⁵ Third, mystical states are transient: they last at most for a half an hour to an hour, and afterwards they “can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory.”²³⁶ Finally, mysticism is marked by its “passivity”: it is a state that happens *to* you, not one that you create yourself. It is the state of being “grasped and help by a superior power.”²³⁷ James moves on to examples, and warms his audience up by discussing ones with which all are liable to be familiar. He discusses everyday “dreamy states” like déjà vu, listening to music, reading poetry, drunkenness, and drugs. Although these everyday mystical experiences are sporadic and not necessarily religious, they still demonstrate that there is different kind of consciousness available to all, always alongside our normal experience and surprisingly accessible.²³⁸

James moves on to specifically religious examples of practices which are known to yield mystical experiences. He explores yoga in India, dhyâna in Buddhism, the Sufi tradition in Islam, and meditation in Western Christianity. James acknowledges that mystical religious experiences are so varied and so individual that they are extremely difficult to study. Still, this diversity makes for James’s richest lecture yet, and the one with the largest number of examples drawn from outside Christianity. The testimonies stand out on the page, and

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 381

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 382-388.

James's use of primary sources blinds in its diversity. As James's biographer, Robert Richardson, eloquently phrased it, "Such a cloud of witnesses and such a crowd of narratives are not easily brushed aside, silenced, or answered."²³⁹ Despite initial variety, in the end the congregation of voices all seem to say the same thing, and there is power in that unity. Universally, mystical states announce that the barriers between the individual and the divine can be broken down, and people can "both become one with the Absolute and . . . become aware of [that] oneness."²⁴⁰ James's description of mystic states ends with that powerful statement, but he still must contend with whether that statement is universally authoritative or not.

James has shown that mystic states are powerful, varied, and unique, but his final question remains. James now asks: does such an individual experience have a claim on wider truth? Mysticism defies philosophical description and repudiates theological dogma. It teaches simply that there is more instead of less, vastness instead of smallness, and unlimitedness instead of limits.²⁴¹ For James, mysticism emphasizes rest instead of unrest, and it is generally monistic, pantheistic, optimistic, and supernatural. James interrogates whether the insights given by mysticism should be taken as gospel truth—for lack of better analogy. He comes to the conclusion that mystical states should indeed be authoritative for the individual who experiences them. But when it comes to other people, they should not accept mystical insights without critical reflection. He asserts nonetheless that the one universal truth the sources *do* reveal is that our

²³⁹ Richardson, p. 414.

²⁴⁰ *Varieties*, p. 419.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

rationalistic consciousness is but one type of consciousness.²⁴² Mystical experiences demonstrate that there are other levels to attune to, deeper experiences to be had, more possibilities to explore. Discussing the meaning of mystical experiences, he asserts:

They tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest. They offer *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset. The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.²⁴³

Something in us, says James, recognizes the truth in mystic states even if we do not experience them ourselves. Something appeals to us on a deeper level than our rationality, our science, our socialization, our cultural context, or our everyday thoughts. Something in us responds to the varieties of religious experience and all the possibilities they offer in an uncertain world.

James rounds out the rest of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* with two last lectures on religious philosophy—much of it repeated from *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, but this time specifically calling for a science of religions—and also other religious characteristics, like prayer. But his most significant points have already been made. The images of healthy-mindedness, the sick soul, conversion, saintliness, and mysticism stand out, as does the connection to his earlier essays. As religious studies scholar Bennett Ramsey explains,

By the end of [the *Varieties*], James had expanded his ‘will to believe’ until it had become the description of all human life, and not simply life at its moments of crisis. Or rather, James had come to define the character of

²⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 422-423.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 428.

all life as a matter of crisis, existence on the edge of the old and new, restless but in a positive way, as an expression of and consent to the fact of possibility.²⁴⁴

The Varieties of Religious Experience can indeed be seen as an expansion and continuation of “The Will to Believe.” The deeper James investigated, the more he realized that all of life is the ‘forced, live, and momentous hypothesis’ he explored in “The Will to Believe.” The hypothesis of life is beyond absolute proof but full of possibility, simply waiting for human action, waiting for the leap of faith. James’s investigations in the *Varieties* explored the unseen universe, optimistic and pessimistic religious attitudes, conversion, and saintliness, and each topic reflected the unknowable, uncertain character of the world. But for James, that same uncertainty translated into possibility; the mystical ‘more’ that enchanted him. After the Gifford Lectures, there was no doubt left in James’s mind that to believe or not believe in it was truly the central question in life.

Analyzing the Gifford Lectures is notoriously difficult, because there is simply so much going on. *Varieties* is complex. In some ways, it is a mediated middle way between science and religion, a “science of religions,” a psychological study. But in other ways, it is a triumph of feeling over reason, of spirituality over rationality. It is beyond easy philosophical categories. James was attempting to do something deeper and more vital—answering questions about what makes us most alive, what makes us hope, what makes us believe. The fact that he would carry out such an audacious project is a sign of the intellectual and spiritual uncertainty of the times and a sign of his own faith in

²⁴⁴ Ramsey, p. 134.

possibility. Beyond philosophical questions, the *Varieties* reveals James's historical context—whether it be the philosophers he had to engage, the prejudices he had to face, the defences he had to make, or the steps he had to take to get his listeners to consider his views on religion. The question remains, however, whether listeners walked away with their questions answered. James was not sure, and likely he felt similar to how he was feeling a year before when he worriedly wrote to his friend Charles Eliot Norton, saying, “by blowing alternately hot and cold on their Christian prejudices I succeeded in baffling them completely . . . I think I permanently dissatisfied both extremes, and pleased a mean numerically quite small.”²⁴⁵ He turned out to be very wrong. As he finished his final sentence on the final day of lectures, the audience exploded in thunderous applause. The room “shook with enthusiasm,” and James was even serenaded with choruses of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow.”²⁴⁶ James’s message of possibility amidst uncertainty obviously did not fall on deaf ears.

²⁴⁵ William James to Charles Eliot Norton, June 26th 1901, *Letters Vol. 2*, p. 151.

²⁴⁶ Richardson, p. 416.

Conclusion:
The Wisdom of William James

In August 1904, two years after completing the Gifford Lectures, James wrote to his friend Edwin D. Starbuck. Starbuck had provided much of the primary source material for the *Varieties* from his collection of religious testimonies, so he was most likely interested to hear James's perspective on the *Varieties* two years on:

I have frankly to confess that my "Varieties" carried "theory" as far as I could then carry it, and that I can carry it no farther today. I can't see clearly over that edge. Yet I am sure that tracks have got to be made there—I think that the fixed point with me is the conviction that our "rational" consciousness touches but a portion of the real universe and that our life is fed by the "mystical" region as well.²⁴⁷

James did not have the words to describe his vision yet, with only the monistic and theistic vocabulary of the day at his disposal.²⁴⁸ But, soon enough, he would make those tracks and describe a pluralistic universe of pure experience, in works like *Pragmatism*, *Radical Empiricism* and *A Pluralistic Universe*, in the last ten years of his life, until his death in 1910. Those works are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study. The core of James's contribution to religious history had already been made by 1902; he had laid a foundation not in quicksand but on solid ground.

James is certainly an unlikely scholar of religion, and an unlikely candidate for scholars of religious history to consider. He was neither minister nor evangelist. He was, however, a philosopher of religion, of the mind, and of

²⁴⁷ William James to Edwin D. Starbuck, 24 August 1904, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 210.

²⁴⁸ See also Ramsey's discussion of the conclusions of the *Varieties*. He calls them "leadings," "suggestions," and "unfinished sketches" of a larger vision. Ramsay, p. 204.

the human experience. He was also a multidisciplinary marvel: he is the same man who coined the widely used modern term, ‘stream of consciousness’, in his *Principles of Psychology*; the man who with the *Varieties of Religious Experience* inspired Bill Wilson to found the universal movement known as Alcoholics Anonymous; the man who mentored students who later became leading thinkers of their day—men such as W.E.B. DuBois, John Dewey, Randolph Bourne and George Santayana. James was a professor, public lecturer, psychologist, and philosopher. But theologian? This same man—who inspired the ‘stream-of-consciousness’ mantra and the worldwide self-help movement for alcoholics—described God in a 1904 religious questionnaire as “dimly” real to him, and wrote “Never” when asked if he had experienced God’s presence. Further, when prompted about prayer, he said, “I can’t possibly pray—I feel foolish and artificial.”²⁴⁹ James certainly did not fit in the traditional mould of ‘believer,’ and neither did he start a movement or found a denomination. His ideas, however, did trickle down into public consciousness. We see them today in pluralistic values, religious and cultural tolerance, social action, and the emphasis on personal experiential religion. James’s own faith is enigmatic, to say the least; his biographer and student Ralph Barton Perry devoted an entire chapter to teasing out the strands of James’s complicated personal faith, in *The Thought and Character of William James*. According to Perry, James “was essentially a man of faith . . . [but he was not interested in]

²⁴⁹ William James’s answers in a religious questionnaire sent out by Professor James B. Pratt of Williams College, Autumn 1904. *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 214.

the specific formulation even of his own personal beliefs.”²⁵⁰ Instead, he looked to others for religious inspiration.

That he looked to others is evident not only in his works, but also in the same religious questionnaire quoted above. When asked whether he accepted the testimony of others who claimed they had felt God directly, James replied emphatically: “Yes! The whole line of testimony on this point is so strong that I am unable to pooh-pooh it away. No doubt there is a germ in me of something similar that makes response.”²⁵¹ He himself believed in a “cognizant and responsive” God, and always had a so-called “mystical germ.”²⁵² To take religion further, however, he had to look to the examples of other people. It was his faith in other people’s faith, and his belief in belief itself that carved out a place for him in religious history. James became a theologian by virtue of the simple fact that he seriously examined religion and pondered God.²⁵³

If James’s personal religion is enigmatic, religious history at the turn of the century is equally so. Every narrative put forward by historians is slightly different. Did religion die a slow death, killed off by atheism and agnosticism? Or was scientific positivism the guilty party? Was science equally uncertain, and only optimistic in its public persona? Did atheism and science only maim conservative mainstream Christianity, and leave movements like the Social Gospel and Spiritualism free to grow and respond to new discoveries in science? Or did those very movements undermine religion by over-zealously

²⁵⁰ Perry, p. 270 in Chapter 29, “James’s Personal Faith,” pp. 264-271.

²⁵¹ *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 214.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, see also James’s letter to James Henry Leuba, 17 April 1904, p. 211.

²⁵³ For more on this idea of an expanded notion of theology, see George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 83.

incorporating science into their theology? Did more traditional, conservative religion survive through the rise of Fundamentalism or theological liberalism?²⁵⁴ And who was affected by this loss of faith—intellectuals, laymen, or both? Further clouding the picture, church membership actually grew substantially during the period, perhaps simply because of immigration and natural population growth rather than conversion.²⁵⁵ In any case, working-class movements of religious revivalism (Pentecostalism) and working-class mainstream churches rooted in tradition (Catholicism) had fewer problems than mainstream Protestantism. Clearly, it is not a simple story. One thing, however, is clear: the years during the Gilded Age and onwards to the turn of the 20th century were a transition period for religion and science. Like all transitions, it was a time of change and therefore very uncertain.

During that time, religion and atheism became equal options, one just as valid as the other for the first time.²⁵⁶ God was no longer a given; instead, people could make a legitimate choice between belief and unbelief. Neither atheism nor science killed religion; instead, faith began its long journey away from national life and toward personal life.²⁵⁷ Religion became more of a subculture than a national communal experience, no longer accepted unanimously and unrivalled. For those who remained in the subculture, and even for those who abandoned belief, the close of the 19th century was not an easy time. Mass society increasingly threatened individual freedom, and

²⁵⁴ For more, see *ibid.*, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

²⁵⁵ Handy, p. 79.

²⁵⁶ See Turner's "Epilogue," pp. 262-269.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

genuine moral choice seemed more and more elusive. Besieged by runaway capitalism, social instability, technological change, waves of immigration, rapid industrialization, and hasty urbanization, it is no wonder that those living at the end of the 19th century struggled with doubt and unease where before they had enjoyed belief and security.

James was one of those people. He experienced the same doubts, suffered the same melancholy, faced the same fears as those around him, all caused by the relentless change of the modern world. James, however, formulated a unique response to all that modern melancholy, doubt, hesitation, and fear. James still believed there was a fight to be fought and an individual will to be exerted, even in the face of the modern, industrial capitalist society.²⁵⁸ James would not give up his search for ultimate meaning despite the changing times—or perhaps because of them. That response is his enduring legacy to religious history. James stood out amongst the other defenders of faith in his day—he neither attempted to assimilate science into religion nor zealously refuted it. Instead, he forged a path between and beyond the two structures, leading towards a new state in religious studies and moral philosophy, where experience and action reigned supreme; where religious worth was tested by its results and science was reminded of its limits.²⁵⁹ James’s science of religions is a middle way to navigate belief through modernity.

Beyond James’s empiricism or science of religions, he is even more deeply significant to religious history for the way in which he appealed to the

²⁵⁸ See Polet, p. 36.

²⁵⁹ See Ramsey, p. 132.

public during a critical moment in America's intellectual history. He appealed to American hearts. At the cusp of modernity, James convinced his readers and listeners that their new choice between believing and not believing was a serious one, demanding not rash or inattentive decision-making but instead careful thought and an open mind. In *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*, he reminded readers of the importance of a metaphysical basis for morality. They could still choose a purely human morality if they wanted, but moral objectivity was lost without belief. In *Is Life Worth Living?*, James faced the melancholia and neurasthenia of his day head-on, arguing that to beat modern meaninglessness, people had to fight for something greater than themselves, greater even than anything in the physical world around them. In *The Will to Believe*, he struck down purely positivistic science by defending the right to believe without evidence in cases where the stakes were high and circumstances outstanding—philosophy-speak for religious faith in the modern world. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James moved from philosophizing to experiencing—teaching his listeners along the way about the unseen universe, healthy-mindedness, sick souls and conversion, saintliness, and mysticism. Without creed, dogma, or theology, James managed to redefine faith: “Religion was not a name just for an aspect of experience but for experience’s fundamental dimension . . . Religion was not a static abstraction or system of doctrines but an active engagement [with experience].”²⁶⁰ To James, to be religious meant to see reality as it really was. Religious life was rich and alive; religious philosophy was relevant and active.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 135.

James is not as often thought about as his contemporaries in religious history. Perhaps one of the reasons is that his message of ‘belief in uncertainty’ became obscured by the philosophers that followed him in the years following his death. Somehow, the philosophic inheritors of his pluralism and pragmatism—John Dewey especially—largely cast off the religious dimension of his philosophy, making the James of historical memory much more of a secularist than he truly was. Religious studies scholar Bennett Ramsey explains this misunderstood legacy:

What James called his ‘religious or quasi-religious philosophy’ has become at times a mild humanism with a general appeal to a ‘common faith,’ and at its most severe an anti-religious, aggressively secularist project aimed at seeing what difference it would make to live according to the norm that nothing is to be worshipped. And where James valorized the saint, later pragmatists have valorized the scientist . . . where James called for a de-absolutized cultural formation, those who came after him have called for a de-divinized formation.²⁶¹

James’s emphasis on belief, tolerance, and humility has been overshadowed since his death. James has become more well-known for his liberal pragmatism than his religious philosophy. His liberal pragmatism, in turn, has transformed into an absolute value and a “common faith” in itself, valuing humanity above all else.²⁶² Often with little tolerance for religion, modern pragmatism also assumes there are no limits to human knowledge. Pragmatism, in short, has become positivistic.

That was not James’s intention. Taken together, James’s works reminded contemporaries that the self is not the center, that the supernatural exists

²⁶¹ Ramsey, p. 141.

²⁶² Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, p. 46.

alongside the natural, and that the universe is open, not closed.²⁶³ There is something still greater than just the mind, consciousness, or even collective human knowledge. All have their limits. It our job, says James to look beyond them. As Paul Jerome Croce puts it, James argued for:

. . . a will to believe despite empirical doubt, for a science of religion despite the haziness of the human psyche, for the truth of pragmatic meaning despite the lack of absolutes, for the integrity and purposefulness of the universe despite its disparate plurality.²⁶⁴

The Jamesian universe “was not a Great State of Things, or architectural monument of cosmic bulk and infinite complexity—it was a stream, a passage, a becoming, a history in the making.”²⁶⁵ What’s more, everyone had a part to play in that making. James’s religious belief that life is noble for reasons beyond the self also informed his social vision. For him the two were inseparable. He paired faith in God with faith in principles such as pluralism and tolerance that acted as a direct response to the economic inequality and growing diversity of his time.²⁶⁶

In his own time, James’s ideas about religion stood as an alternative to militaristic imperialism, racial bigotry, and acquisitive materialism during the Gilded Age and on toward the turn of the century. Today, his ideas stand as a challenge to a narrow-minded, politically-conservative, frequently intolerant version of faith that passes for Christianity in much of American discourse in the 21st century. Through both philosophical contemplation and active investigation, in the end James imparted the wisdom that while we cannot *know*,

²⁶³ See Marsden’s discussion in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, pp. 91-95.

²⁶⁴ Croce, p. 230.

²⁶⁵ Perry, p. 365.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

we can still believe and act, struggle and strive, and perhaps one day seek and find.

At heart, James was a seeker. He was not afraid of a ‘maybe’; he found strength in a ‘what if?’; he gained hope from a ‘perhaps.’ This put him in a perfect position to deal with the uncertainty of his times. He could handle the flux and the frenzy because he knew that truth—religious, philosophical, social—was not lost, it continued to be out there to be found. In fact, truth and change were intertwined and co-dependent. As he once scribbled down in a notebook, “Unless we find a way of conciliating truth and change, we must admit that there is no truth anywhere.”²⁶⁷ James spent his life trying to find that way. Somehow, he found it in change itself. His “refusal to resolve [the] tensions that exist in experience” highlighted the true nature of reality: that it is ever-changing, both beautiful and difficult, a struggle and a joy to live.²⁶⁸ He showed his restless generation that peace could be found in probability and rest in instability. The key was to *do* something, to act, to believe without knowing for certain. The courage and the strength lay in that uncertainty—life is indeed a fight, as James said, and it is a noble and hopeful one that is fought in a world with no guarantees. James recognized that—in this way—the world is built by belief.

²⁶⁷ Notebook 8, “Philosophizing,” William James Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, qtd. in Croce, p. 229.

²⁶⁸ Throntveit, p. 275.

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