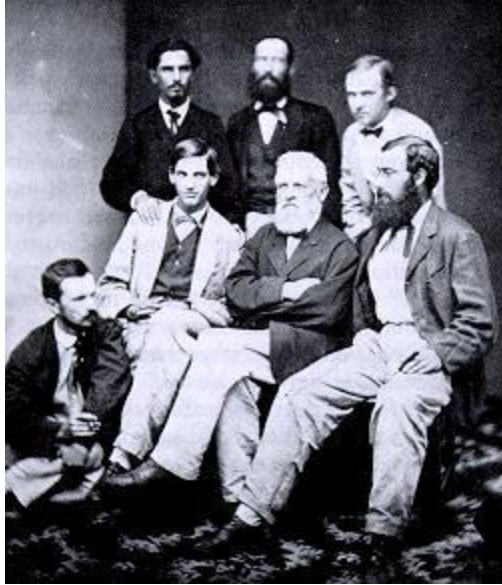


William James' Theory of Religion

(note: this short essay sets up a sort of leit-motif that carries through all the books. It is about subjectivism and anti-science)

The title of this book, Varieties of Religious Delusions and Fictions, derives partly from inverting the title of a famous book by the American philosopher William James: Varieties of Religious Experience . I mean to undo what James did. It continues to surprise me he is taken seriously at all. This is certainly do to the common promotion of delusions in America, so accustomed is the population to the falsehoods of corporate advertising and churches. James was a closet-case spiritualist, not that far from Madame Blavatsky in some ways, of the very sort that Harry Houdini, the great escape artist,¹ was intent on debunking when he debunked “table tappers” and other spiritualist con-artists who exploited those who grieve for the dead. James’ father was a Swedenborgian, and by all accounts, very far into the purple dawn of early spiritual awakening of the 19th century, or what I might call Symbolist and New Ageism now. William studied with the largely discredited creationist Louis Agassiz, an enemy of Darwin, and even went on an expedition with him to Brazil in 1865. I will have occasion to speak of Agassiz in the final chapter on Science.

¹ Houdini is a very interesting man. He became an expert “séance buster” and exposed many fakes and charlatans, some of them very well known. He even incorporated some of their tricks into his stage act. He once said “I have always wanted to believe. It would have meant life to me.” Which is a testament to the sincerity of his searching. I understand his desire and felt that way myself for many years, until I finally grasped that religion really is make believe. Spiritualism supplied the delusion of a life beyond death that had no hell and which also avoided facing the fact that there is no life after death. Alexander graham Bell tried to make phone calls to the spiritual world, but failed to contact his dead brother. Michael Faraday exposed the table moving fraud of séances too. He created a brilliant box with glass rods in it that showed if a table was being pressured horizontally. Faraday was a Christian and did not questioned his own religion, unfortunately. Of course there is a lot more evidence now that Christianity is also a fraud and its gospels and founder probably fictional creations.



James is lower left with cigar,
literally sitting at the feet of the confident 'master'

James' Varieties of Religious Experience pretends to present religion in a quasi-scientific, anthropological manner, but actually his application of science to religion is a caricature. He proposes to study literary sources of religion, which turn out to be 'geniuses' and says: "I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men in works of piety and autobiography" (Pg. 4)² In short he was studying people like his father, or like himself. He specifically excludes ordinary people, who are really the bulk of religions and says of ordinary man that "his religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to him by fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit.." So religion for James is about the subjective delusions of geniuses, basically, and "tradition" is merely a flophouse for these more august delusions made palatable to the masses. But James does not call them delusions, he is seduced by the chimera.

Unfortunately, James had a huge influence on me when I was 16. I

² James, William Varieties of Religious Experience, New York. 1902 Modern Library. I use the same edition my uncle gave me

was very attracted to him and his writing and poured over them at home and in the high school library. I was given my dear uncle Jack's copy of the book, among many other of his books, by my grandma. It was this and other books from my uncle that helped me further into philosophy and cultural studies. Within a few years, by my early 30's., I have explored many proliferating beliefs and practices of the Sufi, Vedantic, Jewish, Holy Roller, Tibetan, Native American, Catholic, Byzantine, esoteric, Hare Krishna, monastic and new age, among others.

This was the Jamesian universe self-multiplying into a Herman Hessian magic theatre of delusions.



Self Portrait by William James 1866³

James states that

³ James was early on an artist, according to his brother Henry in his autobiography. James gave it up, even though he had real promise,-- as this really fine self-portrait shows-- and took up medicine. He studied with William Morris Hunt. Too bad, he would have been a far more interesting artist than philosopher.

The religious phenomenon, studied as an inner fact, and apart from ecclesiastical or theological complications, has shown itself to consist everywhere, and in all its stages, in the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related. [p 465)

The problem with James begins with this concept of the “inner fact”. The ‘inner fact’ of religions is not a fact at all, but merely a thought like thinking of pink elephants. It hardly means they actually exist. “Feel themselves to be related” is the operative phrase, as there is no actual relationship, because the higher powers do not exist. What James does is try to assert that religion is based on subjectivism, and anything subjective is ‘real’ simply because we experience it in our heads or minds. Religions therefore are ‘real’, he says.⁴ There is nothing factual about the inner fact, other than that someone is thinking something. The content of what is thought is most likely fallacious, if one is thinking religion.

This fallacy is the bedrock of James’ theory of religion. He does not account for the fact that our belief-producing faculties are not reliable. Indeed, largely disconnected from nature and living in cities where human language distorts everything in accord with the interests of power and wealth, human are strongly prone to delusional beliefs created out of language or thin air. Multi-cultural subjectivism thrives, encrusted with dreams and falsehoods. If one lives say, in New York City, there is hardly a square inch in one’s life that has

⁴ This fallacy connects him with Kant, F. H. Bradley, Afrikans Spir, and Hans Vaihinger, among others, in that it depends on a notion of subjective impression, rather than demonstrable truth. This rather idealist philosophy was largely anti—empiricist and anti-science. In Spir’s case he absurdly denies reality to things altogether. Something is true it has a benefit, to someone. This theory is really about preserving religion by letting it back in the back door. Vaihinger wants to say we construct reality out of our minds, and we do not really know reality. But anyone who has had children knows reality is out there and must be cared for and quickly. Other species are there, and the world itself is not merely a sense impression. Woodpeckers and squirrels know trees fall in the woods when no people are there.

not been designed by a con-man or a designer. Everything one sees is planned with profit in view. It is one of the most anti-natural and controlled environments on earth. It is a human bubble of self-reflecting profiteering and sensory exploitation, typified by Times Square. James tries to make a virtue of this tragic fact of poor social planning and bad education. Americans will believe almost anything and are encouraged to do so. Telepathy, Pyramids, telekinesis, cosmic consciousness, the holy spirit, astrology, divination, amulets, homeopathy, Tarot, Crop circles, life after death. It is all part of the great William James market of promotable delusions.

James sadly endorses the same solipsistic transcendentalism one finds in Guenon and Schuon too. Following Agassiz, James is one of the fathers of the spiritual supermarket.⁵ He thinks that whatever the mind thinks is real, is real, and therefore religious fictions are real because the mind thinks they are real. A pink elephant is the same as a god in the mind. If you believe in pink elephants will cure you of cancer, well that is a good belief for you, never mind that it is not true. I believe because I believe and that is that, "the heart has reasons". Pascal famously said.

But James is mistaken to think that his theory this has anything to do with truth. While it is true that humans tend to live in imaginary worlds, it is necessary that we try to stop doing that. The real world is suffering under our delusions and we are destroying the planet with our make-believe systems. Religions are magnified delusions, no matter how many millions think the content of religion are real. The delusion is real, in the sense that someone has them and the delusions often have horribly and tangible effects on the world. In

⁵ This notion of individual consciousness as paramount and supreme, is at the basis of a lot of spiritual ideology. It was Whitall Perry's main idea, as he told me himself, following Schuon's similar idea. It is the origin of most anti-science ideology too as the individual is seen and the summit and objective truth is negated--- or so they imagine. Ayn Rand's neo-fascist ideas also put forward the supreme individual as the ultimately conscious one. Olavo De Carvalho write on his website that "the most solid shelter for individual consciousness against alienation and reification can be found in widely varying degrees in the ancient spiritual traditions." This is spiritual fascism in a net shell. Here the self is a supreme fiction, promoted as spirituality, and the world be damned. What is really protected in religion and what William James sought to protect was the right to believe subjectivist delusions.

this James is right. But these figments of imagination remain figments, not realities. There are no pink elephants, in fact.

James says he wants to “reduce religion to its lowest admissible terms” . These terms turn out to be that god, gods and other “hallucinations” “faith states” and all these are the contents of the “subconscious self” James says.⁶ They don’t exist of course, but James’ problem is to resurrect what does not exist and to honor the subjective. The historian Yuval Harari does this too, when he posits that myths matter and the “common imagination” is to be honored as real. It is hard to see how this is a good idea. The natural world is not our construction. Making the world over in the image of humans is a mistake. Species are going extinct and the climate of the earth is faltering due to these delusions. A genetically modified earth made serviceable only to humans is a gross and untenable thing which involves huge injustices against nature to pursue. Violating natural species for human gain is unethical.

James is trying to prove that these hallucinatory faith states are products of the imagination, or ‘useful delusions’, to paraphrase. The fiction is that the “higher self” is a ‘doorway into the subject’, and James does not mind that this is a denial of scientific reality.⁷ Religion becomes an affirmation of what he calls the “hidden mind”, which is not the mind at all, but rather the individual or collective delusions created by extreme emotional states and religious fancy.

⁶ William James prefigures the post-modernist pan-subjectivism that is popular now in New Age circles. David Fideler calls this pan-subjectivism “epistemological pluralism”, by which he means that everything is part of knowing the universe. He thinks that utterly bogus systems of knowledge like Orphic or Pythagorean numerology and cosmology have something to tell us about reality. (His book Jesus Christ, Sun of God relies heavily on numerological fantasy, gematria, so called “sacred geometry”, temple architecture, musical harmonics, Platonic solids, as well as linguistic conceits such as names of Jesus and gods as aspects of representation of the universal Logos(the “sun”. This is all quaint analogies about symbolism and gods who never existed. “All modalities of knowledge contribute to our understanding of the whole.” He writes. This of course is a make believe philosophy that tries to make crack pot ideologies somehow equal to biology or chemistry. The Platonistic holism of the sort Fideler advocates has many problems. I have no sympathy for this point of view. As it demands equality between science and myth or science and spiritual fictions. Darwin cannot be squared with creationism any more than physics or math can be squared with the myth of the new age Jesus that Fideler tries to sell us.

⁷ James announces his belief in the fiction of the subjective ‘truth’ of religion, the idea of “useful delusions” in the last chapter of Varieties of Religious Experience, (1902 edition) pgs. 475-509

Buddhism posits just such an imaginary “mind” as a ‘void’. These states might be real to those who experience them, but they are not real in fact.

This does not mean that all perceptions or emotions are delusional, but only that imagination is not reality and one must be careful to distinguish between the two. Myths are ideological constructions and not reality. They are useful fictions to those who have power, but should be opposed by those who have fairness and justice as their goal. Seeing actual beings, say Salamanders or Prometheus Moths is one thing, they are real. But the abstract idea “Beyond Being” is a fiction and no one knows anything about it, as far as its actual meaning is concerned. “Beyond Being” is a magnified delusion. The idea of Beyond Being or Gods are the invention of metaphysical, literary imaginations of the very sort that James lauds. For James the actual religious experiences of individuals are reality, even though they are delusional. The fact that such experiences have some features in common is not at all surprising, humans being one species, but it hardly follows that religions treats of reality. James writes about the religion of elitist and subjective delusions, as does Guenon, Schuon and many others.

James exalts subjective delusions as real. Giving reality to the unreal is the very nature of American advertising and religion and the two are often the same, both protected by a poorly written constitution. James was thus one of the fathers of the idea that in America one could buy any brand of religion in the metaphysical supermarket and they are all valid. For James, religion is an affair not of public existence but of the market of private fantasy. In this he is indeed a ‘prophet’, as there is a growing arena of marketed delusions rampant in capitalist societies. Managing perceptions is now part of big business, indeed, it is one of the departments in most corporations, where they manufacture illusions, do PR, create ‘brand recognition’ and defend illusory property rights falsely defined as “intellectual property”. This is the world James helped make, a world where one can take a “Course of Miracles”, Channel Ramtha, or “be here now”, without being responsible for anything.

James was trying to create, as were Guenon and Schuon, a transcendental unity of delusions. He was sure that his beliefs were real like facts. He thought his subjectivity was truth merely because it exists in his mind. He thought that subjective delusion was as important and may be more important than science. The “Will to Believe” is the will to accept these delusions, in short. For James, this means that delusions and fictions are real, even if they are not.

The frightening thing about this view of religion, is that it makes delusions normal, and allows capitalism to prosper alongside the completely separate realm of private delusions. Indeed, the privatized delusions become utterly meaningless distractions and enabling devices to allow rapacious entrepreneurs who can then do their business unquestioned and unabated. The glory of the Jamesean era of subjective delusions is that private spirituality acts as a dumbing down mechanism so that they rich can continue to exploit with minimal criticism. Everyone revolves around the pivot of their private delusions, to which they are given a right by the Constitution in the ‘freedom of religion’ and meanwhile the economic freedom which alone would make them really free, is largely taken from them, given unjustly to corporations, whose “personhood” is a delusional fiction in exactly the way religions are a delusional fiction. Indeed, the modern religion is the corporation itself and the major religions are all pawns now in the corporate game. Metaphysics has been enshrined as non-empirical private fantasy almost by definition. Spirituality and corporations collude in keeping society complacent, unthinking and in line, so the real business of the rich getting richer can go on without too much criticism. .

Employing a really dumb “optimism” James tried to “redeem religion from unwholesome privacy”, in his own words. This wish to erect into social reality what in fact is only fiction is terribly problematic, to say the least. He wants to erect delusion as a public right. But in the age of Robber Barons, there were worse delusions promoted as for the good of Americans, and James as a

professor at Harvard, appears to have made it easier for them to be Robber Barons. Keep the people deluded and it will help the rich. He wanted to erect religion on a scientific foundation and to do this he had to falsify religion and science, and I am sure that he failed, as others have since James time. ⁸

James should have seen that religion is deceit and has economic ramifications. Religion encourages either an individual subject deceiving himself or an institutional promoting of delusions in the interests of class politics.. Private fantasy at home and public lying at large is the world James helped make. TV, computers and cell phones create an imaginary 'cyber-space' that rules most people's lives. James does sometimes come close to admitting the falsity of all this, but then veers off. For instance he admits that "it may well prove that prayer is subjective exclusively"⁹ which obviously, it truly is. But he can't or won't admit it. In another passage James admits that there are mystics and then notes that those who are sure of their visions might yet suffer from subjective illusions. He notes that besides mystics such as one finds in Christianity or Sufi orders, there is "the other half who have not accumulated traditions except those which the text books on insanity supply" He sees little difference between the great mystics and those suffering from "delusional insanity" He finds in one as the other:

"The same sense of ineffable importance in the smallest events, the same texts and words coming with new meanings, the same voices and visions and leadings and missions, the same controlling by extraneous powers;"¹⁰

Well , now he is getting somewhere. Indeed there is little difference between a Saint Teresa, canonized by a church and an ordinary women whose visions are not so useful, who languishes in a mental hospital alone. There is no real

⁸ James, William Varieties of Religious Experience, New York. 1902 Modern Library, page 423

⁹ Ibid. pg. 455

¹⁰ James

difference here in fact, though one gets canonized and the other dies in shame and despair, the only difference is an institution treats one as an advertisement and neglects the other to her death. Teresa, Francis, Lenin, Mao, or Jesus are all useful fictions or myths. Indeed, James' book is itself an example of this: he extols the virtues of unusual mystics and eccentrics and tries to make Protestant saints out of them. Ordinary people, animals and nature are ignored.

George Santayana rightly criticized James fanciful notions about religion as having a "tendency to disintegrate the idea of truth, to recommend belief without reason and to encourage superstition." Exactly right. Bertrand Russell comes to the same conclusions. He accuses James of being hopelessly "subjective", and quotes James rather ridiculous statement that "an idea is true so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives".¹¹ If it is useful to believe a delusion than go ahead and believe it, James thought. Santa Claus is useful, therefore I believe it is true that he exists. God is useful, therefore he must exist. Russell rightly shows this is an erroneous argument.

But much of the logic behind James's Varieties of Religious Experience is of this kind. James' book fails to prove his case, and indeed, ironically his book is a useful exercise in showing how religious thought is a 'useful delusion'. James was sure that his beliefs were real, like facts, simply because he wanted to believe things for which there were no evidence. This 'pathological subjectivity' is at the root of all the religions, its true "esoterism" as it were. In this book I will be showing various ways in which religious delusions are useful to various churches, religious institutions, cult leaders, social networks, academics, reactionary and national politics, and charlatans, in addition of course to ordinary people--- who also have multiple reasons to delude themselves. I do not exempt myself from this description and this book is itself a testament to the ways I was once deluded by religion, but I woke up out of that. This book is the opposite of James book and seeks to reverse the

¹¹Russell, Bertrand, quote in History of Philosophy see page 816-818

corrosive uses of spirituality that James sought to justify. (this book is actually three books but here I refer to it as one thing, which it is too)

James does not question religion at its root. He mystifies the notion of experience, which is a very important notion. Our experience of life and the world is the basis of science. But in James this notion is torn from its roots in reality and made to serve fictional and delusional ideas. He is rather like a junkie trying to write objectively about the opium he is still addicted to. He tries to make up a “science of religion” but ends in showing how bankrupt religion really is. I am concerned here with viewing religion from a much further distance than James and with no admission that the realities it pretends to describe are real. I have much more extensive experience of the practice of religions than James ever had. I can show how they are bogus and why they are not true. There is nothing commensurate between religion’s ideas of god and the facts of evolution. Nor is or the truth of ordinary physics in any way the same thing as Buddhism or Hindu ideas, as I will show later.

In this book James’ “the Will to Believe” has been negated, there is no reason to “believe “ anymore. The will to believe has been merely the will to ignore reality and dream fictions. Religious experience is misread and misinterpreted by the religious. The delusional nature of religion is evident. What I have done here is to turn the “Varieties of Religious Experience” on its head and shown, I hope, that the notion of religious experience as having any truth in it is fallacious. I see no reason to negate truth as James does and celebrate religious delusions as a wonderful thing. Hence the title of this book.

The standard definition of religion in the Oxford Dictionary is “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods”. But this so vague as to be useless. The etymology of the word is more helpful .

“English (originally in the sense ‘life under monastic vows’): from Old French, or from Latin *religio(n-)* ‘obligation, bond, reverence’, perhaps based on Latin *relegate* ‘to bind’”

This is better in that it implies social control, "obligation" is power relations and thus a 'cult' or an obligatory set of beliefs and social requirements and rules of some kind. The point of religion is the control and direction of subjectivity along lines that please an elite. This defines religion correctly as a form of politics conditioned by mythology. A more accurate definition of religion thus might be:

"a shared system of symbols and superstitions that is based on falsehoods, myths and fictions that tries to normalize relations between people in view of a power structure".

Or to change this definition slightly:

'a non-evolutionary but shared system of cultural delusions and transcendental pretensions based on imaginary or symbolic data that has little or no basis in reality, and which is unfalsifiable and unverifiable, and which is used to separate groups of people and discriminate against an out-class on the basis of the fictional ideology of an in-class'.

Yes, these definitions capture the bifurcated, dysfunctional and split-minded schizophrenia of religion pretty well. Gods are unfalsifiable and unverifiable, since no evidence can be found for their existence, nor can one say that they do not exist, also because of lack of evidence, other than vague feelings or false inferences of agency. People often say that god is evident because who else could have created nature, for instance, but actually there is no evidence at all that anyone "created" nature. This is the symbolist argument. People then say that they just "know" that god exists, when they do not know this at all. This is the subjective argument.

Religion occasionally does do good things, despite its firm grounding in delusions and make believe. It gives people a crutch to help them shoulder their losses. It occasionally helps the poor in soup kitchens or flop houses and helps the needy, all praiseworthy things, though it usually gives much more to the rich, and helps the poor stay poor. It comforts the widows, but only if they show signs of being willing to convert. It does wedding and funerals and this helps some people. Religion also creates a system of prejudices that people

must follow, and punishments if they do not. But it remains is a form of social control, even in the current milieu where there is an obligatory non-denominational “spirituality” that requires an escapist, feel good, laissez faire openness which implicitly endorses the status quo and rarely questions authority.