

TWO ARGUMENTS AGAINST SOME CRITICS OF RELIGION BASED ON FEELING AND EMOTION FOLLOWING WILLIAM JAMES

KATJA THÖRNER

Abstract. In this paper I will show that you can distinguish two main types of argumentation in respect to feeling and emotions in the philosophy of religion of William James, which point to two different kind of criticism of religion. Especially in his early works, James argues that you may lawfully adopt religious beliefs on the basis of passionnal grounds. This argumentation points to a type of criticism of religion, which denies that beliefs based on such emotional grounds may be justified. In his famous study *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James defines religious experience as an experience of inner conversion, where the individual gets in touch with a higher self. The philosophical interpretation of religious experience points not at least to a type of criticism of religion in the tradition of Ludwig Feuerbach, which is known as the theory of projection.

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether emotion or feeling plays a decisive role in the formation of religious beliefs is connected closely to a kind of criticism of religion, which was famously framed by Ludwig Feuerbach in his work 'The Essence of Christianity' (1841) and has gone down as the 'theory of projection' in the history of criticism of religion. The basic idea is that all speech of God is basically anthropology, for the properties, which are attributed to God or Gods by humans, are nothing else than human attributes projected to a higher being or higher beings. It is, or they are, considered as higher beings because human beings attribute to it/them

only the most sublime and noble properties. In this way human beings are creating ideal images of themselves, and as they are conscious of their own imperfectness they consider themselves to stand in an infinite distance to their God/Gods. Facing the Gods they have installed themselves, human beings, according to Feuerbach, regard themselves to be limited tiny creatures. Criticism of religion in this respect means to enlighten mankind about this inner process and to remind them of their own nobility and magnitude – of the divine in themselves. ‘Rather, every being is in and by itself infinite – has its God, its highest conceivable being, in itself.’ (*The Essence of Christianity*, p. 7.¹ Hereafter ‘*EoCh*.’) In the introduction of *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach emphasizes the high importance of the faculty of feeling in religion. Feeling is called ‘the organ of the divine’ and ‘the noblest, the most excellent, i.e., the divine, in man’ (*EoCh*, p. 9). Without mentioning his name Feuerbach appeals in this passage to Schleiermacher and his definition of religion as ‘feeling or intuition of the Universe’ in his work ‘On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers.’² But at the same time he criticizes the idea that feeling is the organ of perception, which enables us to recognize the infinite divine nature of God. In this theory of religion feeling is not only the subjective part of the process of recognizing God, it ‘is declared to be itself the absolute, the divine’ (*EoCh*, p. 10). Only in the reflection can you separate feeling from his object. In reflection, the object is defined and also limited. For God is unlimited, the only definition of God following the antecedents steps could be that ‘God is pure, unlimited, free Feeling. Every other God, whom thou supposest, is a God thrust upon thy feeling from without’ (*EoCh*, p. 10). In this mystic moment of immediate experience ‘feeling is atheistic’ from ‘the point of view of the orthodox form of belief, which is decisive as to the manner in which religion relates itself to an external object’ (*EoCh*, p. 10). Feeling in immediate presence ‘denies an objective God – it is its own God’ (*EoCh*, p. 10).³

¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated from the Second German Edition by Marian Evans (London: John Chapman, 1854).

² ‘Ihr Wesen ist weder Denken noch Handeln, sondern Anschauung und Gefühl.’ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799), in *ibid.*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Bd. I/2: Schriften aus der Berliner Zeit 1769-1799, hg. v. Günter Meckenstock (Berlin/New York: Verlag Walter de Gruyter, 1984), p. 213.

³ A similar approach to that of Feuerbach’s, inspired by Humanism and the idea of emancipation, in this respect nowadays is pursued by the representatives of the so-called

If atheistic feeling is his own God, theistic feeling could be defined as a feeling in which the difference between God and self is preserved. The epistemological question arising there is: Is it possible to hold on to the distinction between God and self in the moment of immediate and unlimited feeling? Or is it only in reflection that you separate feeling as the subject part of experience and God as his object with the result that God only could appear as limited, for always in some respect defined as object?

As I'll show in the second chapter of this paper, James develops in his study *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) a concept of religious experience which is based on an immediate feeling of the presence of a higher self. But although it reminds in this respect of the assertions in the introduction of Feuerbach's 'Essence of Christianity', James' conception isn't atheistic at all. Whereas James also considers the mystical point of immediate feeling as one but not the only significant aspect of religious experience, he avoids the atheistic, by construing religious experience not in correspondence to sense-perception but to the experience to be confronted to a person as another self. In this perception of the other as a self, the difference between myself and the other is always present without considering the other as an object. The cosmological and theological consequences of this conception of religious experience, or more precisely the experience of God as a higher self, are developed by James in his later work *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). James infers that if we consider God as a person, which is able to communicate with finite persons like us, we have to think of God as finite too, for his power is limited by the free will of human beings. So the concept of religious experience as the experience of a higher self not only avoids the coincidence of God and the subject of religious experience, but also the coincidence of subjectivity and God in an idealistic way considered as the 'Weltgeist' (world spirit) or some related concepts. The latter at least is important to prevent, in some moral and humanistic respect: James shares with Feuerbach the intuition that it is inhuman to think of God as the Absolute in the meaning of a perfect, almighty and eternal being in contrast to human beings as determined, imperfect and sinful.

But even if it is possible to establish a compelling epistemological model of religious experience, respectively of the experience of

New-Atheists like Richard Dawkins, the French philosopher Michel Onfray or the British philosopher Christopher Hitchens.

communicating with a higher self, named God, it is another question if this conception could be a reason to believe in God.

The question of whether feeling in the sense of an immediate experience of God may function as a foundation of religious belief in fact obviously couldn't be denied, at least if you think of the rise of Pentecostals all over the world. Perhaps the special appeal of this kind of religion, where immediate and high emotional experiences are considered as a special witness of the truth of the belief, is due to the fact that traditional definition of the object of religious experience, in short the attributes of God, have lost their cognitive reasonableness and intelligibility. Or to say it in the words of Feuerbach: 'But the object of feeling is become a matter of indifference, only because when once feeling has been pronounced to be the subjective essence of religion only, it in fact is also the objective essence of religion, though it may not be declared, at least directly, to be such.' (*EoCh*, p. 9)

But philosophers do not ask if in fact people come to religious beliefs on the basis on high emotional experiences, but if it is reasonable to think of beliefs as being true if they are accompanied by intense feelings or emotional longings. It may be comprehensible that people become believers on such reasons. But to warrant religious beliefs in reference to the intensity of emotional experience, the overwhelming feeling of God's presence or an inner need to belief is not an easy business, especially in a rationalistic tradition of thinking.

A more sophisticated kind of rationalistic criticism of religion differentiates between religious beliefs which are based on pure feeling alone and such beliefs, which go along with special feelings, but are also intellectually understandable. A contemporary representative of the latter point of view is Franz von Kutschera. In his book *Was vom Christentum bleibt* (What remains of Christianity), he argues for a 'mature Christianity', which refuses emotions like 'to comfort mourning' or 'share happiness' as honest motives for believing,⁴ if they function as the main motif of religious belief. A sober and mature Christianity which breaks loose from mythological ideas, which are able to produce immediately high emotions and deep feelings, presumably will stay for a long time in the future of mankind, because it fits the modern mature person who always scrutinizes his own experiences and like to justify their beliefs to themselves. Also, other contemporary critics of religion like the German

⁴ Franz von Kutschera, *Was vom Christentum bleibt* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2008), p. 142.

philosophers Herbert Schnädelbach and Ernst Tugendhat consider the ideal of intellectual integrity as the crucial point, which keeps them away from religious belief. For them there is no possibility to believe without losing intellectual integrity. And to give other impulses a higher priority than reasoning in the case of religious belief is considered to be an obstacle to the ideal of intellectual integrity. The idea behind this conviction is that beliefs based on feelings and emotions are just illusions. To hold them to be true would be self-deluding. And the intellectual single-minded thinker never could delude himself.

In contrast to such a kind of criticism of religion, or more precisely abstinence of beliefs based on emotional longings or immediate feelings, I will present in the first part of this paper the pragmatic version of justifying religious beliefs, as it is developed by William James in his famous paper of the year 1896 'The Will to Believe'. I will adduce some passages from the *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and some early papers on popular philosophy. In these articles, originating before his famous study *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James construes religious belief also as an adherence to a conviction based on emotional affinity. Especially his article 'The Will to Believe' appeals to rigid rationalists of this time, like W. E. Clifford, who argues that a belief which is based on emotional grounds may in principle never held to be true. Against this position James argues that it is rather irrational to deny religious beliefs for being based on emotional grounds or for the reason that (some) human beings have the affinity to believe in God, a higher power or some similar things.

In the second part of the paper I will outline the cognitive aspect of religious feeling in James' conception of religion. This model involves the idea of transcendental experience, which on the one hand is construed as a kind of experience of transcendence which is rooted on the consciousness of self. In this respect it can be seen in the tradition of Schleiermacher. On the other hand he opens up the immanent consequences in the concept of religious experience, which are implied in an idealistic tradition of philosophy to a realistic interpretation on the basis of his conception of 'radical empiricism'. In respect to the first part of the paper, it will be asked whether the realistic interpretation of feeling in religious experience may refute the suspicion of being deluded or to have succumbed to an illusion by religious experience.

I. THE JUSTIFICATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The article ‘The Will to Believe’ (1896) was written by James in his own words as an ‘essay in justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters.’⁵ In this text the acceptance of religious beliefs is defined as a decision in case of a ‘genuine option.’ It is characterized by the following features:

At first it is defined as a living option. This topic limits the circle of the people which could possibly be convinced by the following argumentation. The intended audience is called by James the ‘the saving remnant’, that means in biblical terms those who are capable of returning to God (see Isaiah 10:22). In the words of Max Weber, it may also be possible to speak of religious musical people (*religiös musikalisch*), who have the volition and are capable not only of adopting religious beliefs, but of making them their own. Secondly a genuine option is characterized as an unavoidable or forced option, that means there is only the option to be religious or to be non-religious and it is not possible to avoid this decision in one’s lifetime – to be an agnostic would be the same as to be a non-religious, because faith wouldn’t be a defining element of one’s life. Thirdly a genuine option is held to be seen as a momentous option because it is the only way to reach a most valuable good – not only after, but still in one’s lifetime.

The thesis James defends in ‘The Will to Believe’ is that in cases in which we have to make a genuine option and we are not able to make it on intellectual grounds, we are not only rationally justified to make the decision on passional grounds, but we have to decide on these reasons – just because in such cases there is no other option.

The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds. (*WB*, p. 20)

This quote shows that James’ thesis includes another, fourth defining feature of a ‘genuine option’ in respect of religious beliefs: it is not possible to get convinced of their truth or untruth on intellectual grounds. That shows that James starts his argumentation on the basis introduced by Kant

⁵ William James, ‘The Will to Believe’, in: *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, The Works of William James*, vol. 6 (MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 13-33 (p. 13). (Hereafter *WB*)

in philosophy of religion: The existence of God cannot be demonstrated on intellectual grounds.

When we are confronted with a genuine option, it is always justified, James argues further, to hold that assumption to be true, of which we wish it would be true. Or to say it the other way around: There is no reason to choose the more unpleasant 'truth', only to avoid the risk of getting deluded by our own wishing and longings. The argument here is that religious beliefs mustn't have to be considered as theoretical assumptions or explanations (not even as metaphysical assumptions), but as beliefs which will serve as a foundation for living or the grounding of our attitudes toward our whole life.

Our faculties of belief were not primarily given us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given us to live by.⁶

Religious beliefs in the first way shouldn't, following James, serve to prove the truth of some doctrines about the existence or attributes of God and in so doing, condemn opposite ones, instead they have the function of giving orientation in central topics of life. To be justified in adopting some religious assumptions and to deny other ones under this respect doesn't contradict our self-conception as matured rational thinking persons, to take these assumptions to be the foundation of living and our attitude towards central topics of life, if we think this to be a good or even the best option for ourselves. To this extent James' position is an example of a modern tolerant subjective kind of understanding religion, which intends to allow everyone his individualistic pursuit of happiness, in religion also. The only limitation is to be tolerant against other beliefs.

But the main point in regard of the proponents, who deny the legitimacy of religious beliefs, is the assertion stated in addition by James in his early works in philosophy of religion, that it is more appropriate for the human mind to believe – and in a special broader sense of rationality – is even more rational to believe in God as not to do so. This broader concept of rationality includes the fact that the emotional and passionate nature is an irreducible dimension of human rationality. The argumentation for this assertion lies in a special idea about the nature of beliefs, and the function they have in human life.

⁶ William James, 'Is Life Worth Living?', in: *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, pp. 34-56 (pp. 51f.).

II. SENTIMENT OF RATIONALITY

For James – as in the tradition of pragmatism at all – beliefs are not to be understood as sentences which we categorize as true and false, but which have in the first way the function of giving orientation to our acting, feeling and thinking. The larger the set of firm belief, the more solid is the ground we walk on. For we all seek to have a maximum of firmness of a largest as possible set of beliefs; every individual has, in the words of James, the inclination to dogmatize like a pope. But, to take the metaphor further, the biggest counterpart of the pope, or more precisely of firm beliefs, is empirical evidence. Experiences which are opposed to some of our beliefs force us constantly to revise, or at least to correct, our view of reality. The more fundamental the experiences are, the more extensive are the consequences to the whole set of beliefs, and the higher the feeling of insecurity. The opposite state of mind, when the maximum of stability and firmness in accordance with our experiences is reached, which most people strive for, because it is the only state in which mind finds peace, James will name later on in his study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ‘faith-state’, a concept introduced by the psychologist H. Leuba. In an earlier paper he speaks of a sentiment or feeling of rationality. In this paper, titled ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’ (1879), James defends the thesis that a sentiment of rationality may only be reached if we hold the following assumptions to be true: that there is a God, that this God is the substance of all existent being, and that the essence of all existence is construed in such a way that the world may come to a good ending. Without the idea of God as the origin and essence of all existence we were always confronted with ‘blighting breath of ultimate Why?’⁷ what will never come to a solution entails that mind will never come to rest. Moreover we are, following James, creatures which have as acting beings a teleological orientation on ethical and moral norms and the final idea of the Good in itself. Each ‘world-view’ which is opposed to that deep inclination (defeatism or fatalism, for example) transforms life into an irrational scenery, so the ‘sentiment of rationality’ will never come up, if we live on a ‘world-view’ like this. By reference to the early papers it is possible to give a more precise idea of James’ conception of religious belief: Religious beliefs can be described

⁷ William James, ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’, in: *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, pp. 57-89 (p. 64).

as comprising a world view that entails the assumption of a great being which shares with human being the profound moral intuitions and cares about these intuitions. It is held to be the basis of all and fulfils the desire to have an answer to the question of the wherefrom and whereto of individual life and also the world as a whole.

From the standpoint of the criticism of religion, it could be argued that James wrongfully assumes in this conception that the searching for answers to these questions is an anthropological constant, for a lot of people don't care about them. They are pleased to live a good and decent life in the mortal world, and are not interested or even worried of what will come to pass at the end of days. I think this objection is a fundamental one, particularly if you think of the rising number of non-religious persons in most European countries. But even if you reply that these questions are always raised by reasoning itself, it is questionable if it is possible to satisfy this intellectual longing by deciding to believe in God.

Both objections couldn't be defeated on the basis of 'The Will to Believe'. James' achievements in 'The Will to Believe' and other early papers on the philosophy of religion are only directed at the laggards who think it to be intellectual dishonest to adopt religious beliefs based on emotional longings and therefore forbid themselves such belief. The aim of James' argumentation here is a therapeutic one: The psychologist James states that to ban religious beliefs out of life for rigid intellectual reason may cause a type of melancholy or 'Weltschmerz', which may, in the worst cast, drive someone into suicide.

In an apologetic respect, James refutes the claim that it is necessarily irrational to have religious beliefs. For always when we are confronted with a religious question in life we are confronted with a 'genuine option', which can only be decided on the basis of our volitional and emotional nature. Even the atheist or the ascetic in religious affairs, the agnostic, has to make his decision on the same grounds. For James it is obvious that the former will never be a lucky person, and because we all have the intention to get happy in some respect, the inner life of the disbeliever and the agnostic is going in a wrong direction, which in some cases will end up in religious disease. In the words of Wittgenstein, it would be possible to summarize James' pragmatic approach to that point as follows: 'Believe in! It doesn't hurt.' ('Glaube Du! Es schadet dir nicht!')⁸

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen. Eine Auswahl aus dem Nachlass* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 33.

Or in a more therapeutic version: ‘Don’t ban religious faith out of your life. That might hurt you.’

III. THE TRANSITION FROM ‘ASSENT’ TO ‘CONSENT’

Concerning the question of whether there is a cognitive aspect of religious feeling, it is interesting to ask why some people, who can follow the argumentation up to that point, adopt religious beliefs, whereas others couldn’t believe although they do not think it would be dishonest to do so. Or to put it the other way around, the question is: When does affective inclination have the power to overcome all scruples and generate stable religious beliefs and hence a stable state of mind (faith-state)?

In his work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890, hereafter *PP*) James differentiates between to ‘assent to a claim’ and to ‘consent to a claim’. You may assent to religious beliefs without consenting to them. The transition from ‘assent’ to ‘consent’, according to James, is mostly obscure. James’ assumption in the *PP* is that ‘nature’ sometimes works for us and produces instantaneous conversions for us, so within a moment we are highly convinced of something which until recently was remote to us.

Nature sometimes, and indeed not very infrequently, produces instantaneous conversions for us. She suddenly puts us in an active connection with objects of which she had till then left us cold. (*PP*, p. 948)⁹

It also is possible, following James in this chapter of the *PP*, to arbitrarily decide to adopt an opinion and to treat it like a true claim by letting it determine our feeling, acting and thinking. In this case too, nature will do her work for us by creating such a close connection between the object of the opinion and our habit that it will become a solid belief.

[...] we need only in cold blood ACT as if the thing in question were real, and keep acting as if it were real, and it infallibly ends by growing into such a connection with our life that it will become real. It will become so knit with habit and emotion that our interests in it will be those which characterize belief. (*PP*, pp. 948f.)

The latter type of the transition describes the ‘genuine option’ as demonstrated above, the first type of transition from ‘assent’ to ‘consent’ – the conversion – is central to James’ studies in the *Varieties of Religious*

⁹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, The Works of William James vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA/ London, Harvard University Press, 1981).

Experience. Religious experience there will be defined in one respect as the inner process of the consent to religious beliefs or more precisely the consent to the claim that there is a 'higher Self' we can get in personal touch with.

IV. THE COGNITIVE MEANING OF FEELING IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: A REALISTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSCENDENCE

Stream of Thought

The basic structure of the argumentation laid down in the study *The Varieties of Religious Experience (VRE)*, which compared to the mass of individual experiences of conversion mostly falls into the background, is also presented in the *Principles of Psychology*. In chapter nine of this major work, James introduces the concept of 'stream of thought' as a starting point for studying the manifold acts of thinking without the criterial distinction between the objective world and subjective perception. In this conception everything which can be an 'object' of the 'stream of thought' is real, or to say it in a different way: everything thought of is real. The meaning of 'thought' in this chapter is more like that of consciousness than that of intellectual capabilities like understanding or reasoning. 'Thought' always refers to something beyond, something thought or to say it in the words of Edmund Husserl the 'intentional object' or 'noema'. So every intentional object is a real object of the 'stream of thought', and what cannot be an object of the 'stream of thought' couldn't be real if it would just be beyond thinking.

On the basis of this concept of reality, it is obvious that beliefs which are in the centre of our acting, thinking and feeling, are also real in a major level. To a certain degree we are able to control which beliefs come in the centre of our life. For example we can train ourselves to ban some worries or fears out of the centre, and so to minimize the influence upon us by focusing on more positive options. If these positive ideas have the power to motivate us to realize them, our ideas will become real in a literal sense. Naturally it is not possible to realize all the things we try to and normally we are able to evaluate what is possible to do and what will be prospectively in vain. So we usually don't follow ideas which are totally odd, only because we would like to have them be true.

But I think James is also right when he notes that human beings as a rule tend to be exuberant when they are engaged to try to fulfil their deepest wishes. James even thinks that the struggle to realize those ideals that we consider to be highest goods is a profound and deeply inner impulse of a human being, and the lack of it would be worse than receiving a lot of setbacks. James then speaks of the 'strong mood', which is an essential part of happiness.

The more we are convinced of the worthy and goodness of our ideals the more they are present in our thinking, acting and feelings. Religious beliefs are, according to James, a kind of maximum case of an idea of goodness or an idea of ideal reality, which maybe could become real, but only with enormous exertion. But the ideal seems to be so highly worthwhile that it has the power to stay in the centre of a human's acting, feeling and thinking, even it seems that only wonders could make them real. In his later work (*A Pluralistic Universe*, 1909) James develops the idea of God as 'Great Companion', who assists and helps mankind to fulfil this great and superhuman assignment to realize the Good. But in contrast to Feuerbach, James' concept entails a finite God and not an absolute superhuman God. It's our helper and *primus inter pares*, but even he is powerless without the good will of mankind. In this respect James criticizes, like Feuerbach, the idealistic idea of God as the Absolute, but instead of denying the existence of God, he denies that we must think of him to be the Absolute.

Conversion – Religious Experience – Theism

But up to that point we are still on the level of autosuggestion. Religious faith thus seems to be nothing but a strong belief in something, which may be true or may just be an illusion. Even if there are good practical reasons to have such convictions, like to lead a happy life, particularly religious people would say that their faith involves something more. They do not only think that their faith fits to their way of life, but that it is grounded in a real assumption of the world, in particular, of the origin and the final destination of the world and all being therein. This 'more' even denotes the point where James left the basis of his early papers on popular philosophy and *The Principles of Psychology* when he comes on to his conclusions of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Religious experience is there described as the experience of a total inner breakdown of effort of will. In this moment of volitional failure

and mental breakdown a moment of reality suddenly appears, which opens up the range of reality in a significant way. It is not the experience of something more in the visible world, but of a new aspect of reality itself which previously seems to have been inaccessible. This experience distinguishes the believer in some religious doctrines from a true believer.

Religious experience, following James' description in the *VRE* takes place in two stages: First the individual feels that there is something fundamentally wrong with itself and the world surrounding it. This feeling may be expressed in a consciousness of guilt or in a – considered from an out-standing perspective – one-sided look at the evil things in the world, like crime and misfortune. The individual at this stage still has the deep desire to believe that there is some balance between good and evil, and all evil things will come to a happy ending, but confronted with his one-sided experience of the world or/and himself, he can't. This deep point of suffering at the end makes him feel divided within himself. He wants to believe in the good, but he can't, because he and the world surrounding him is not good. This *circulus vitiosus* may lead into a deep despair, where everything becomes meaningless and the desire to die increases. Just in the deepest moment of suffering an unexpected turn of the inner life of the person takes place: The positive and life-affirming powers suddenly come to prevail and the individual gets more and more convinced that the true nature of reality is good.

The psychological model of explanation of this inner process, which James is providing in the *VRE*, is based on the theory of the subconscious. Following this explanation in the first state, the state of deep suffering, all the positive powers have been suppressed by the permanent impression of evil, so that at the end they were split off in the 'subliminal self' so they couldn't have any influence over the thinking, feeling or acting of the individual. This dissociation of a whole section of human being, which inhibits all positive sight of life, all feeling of joy or other positive feelings and paralyzes in the end all motivation of constructive acting, is called by James the 'divided self'. One way to get in contact with that subconscious region of the self is to get focused on the idea of Good, for in this way the so to speak synapses or the hidden region of the self will be activated. This type of religious conversion was described by James in 'The Will to Believe'. Another way to get in contact with hidden regions is to block the negative forces; an outer stimulus has the power to overwhelm them, or otherwise the negative mental forces wear down so that the positive

powers hidden yet in the subconscious suddenly gain influence on the individual.

From the subjective point of view, the experience of conversion is often described by the individual – given the cultural and intellectual context – as an encounter with another, higher person, called God. The individual, who describes his experience in religious terms, would say that it was God himself who, as the paragon of the Good, releases him. To this point of view the experience of the encounter with God causes the conversion and in that way redeemed the individual of his inner sickness. The psychological explanation does not contradict that religious point of view. But this ‘over-belief’, as James calls it, transcends the boundaries of science for it supposes with God an ‘entity’ which by definition cannot be an object of scientific explanation. Science simply stops there. But from a philosophical point of view, according to James, we ‘have no excuse calling the unseen or mystical world unreal’ (*VRE*, p. 406), when we have to take into account that this world produces effects in the natural world.

From a philosophical point of view it is also necessary to take into account that these causes are real, because they are a moment of experience for many individuals, who ordinarily are not under suspicion to confuse reality with their dreams or hopes. The main reason to take into account the literal truth of the experience of getting in contact with a higher personal entity, in James’s thinking, lies in his theory of reality, which was even developed within the boundaries of psychology as a natural science. In *VRE* James gives a sketch of his philosophical theory of ‘pure experience’, which he developed in his later works and couldn’t be presented in this paper in its whole range. But it will suffice to take a look at the *VRE*. In chapter XX, ‘Conclusions’, James defines the experience as ‘the place’ where the reality of the world is given to us as a ‘full fact’.

A conscious field *plus* its object as felt or thought of *plus* an attitude towards the object *plus* the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs – such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the ‘object’ is when taken all alone. It is a *full* fact, even though it be an insignificant fact; it is of the *kind* to which all realities whatsoever must belong; the motor currents of the world run through the like of it; it is on the line connecting real events with real events. (*VRE*, p. 393)

If it is true that reality in the fullest sense ‘happens’ in concrete experience, it is clear that we cannot separate the existence of God from the experience of God. It is not possible to prove first that there is a God above, and then believe in it. Religious experience as the unit of the feeling of getting in contact with God plus the specific attitude to God plus the sense of being a self are connected, but different even from God is the *‘fons et origo’* of all religion. That there is no proof of the existence of God above the fact that there are individuals who have a feeling of its being present isn’t an argument against his existence at all. Moreover it is a crucial fact which philosophy has to take into account, if it claims to elaborate an idea of reality as a whole.

In the postscript to ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’, James honours this philosophical assumption when he presents a draft of a type of philosophical world-view, which takes account of the fact that human beings have religious experiences and there is no reason not to take them to be true. This world-view has to be a supernatural one, because religious beliefs involve concepts that transcend the world of natural science. Religions indeed appeal to a special kind of reality of a personal nature.

So religion is more than a ‘rosy view’ of the world. It postulates facts (‘postulator of new facts’, *VRE*, p. 406.) that transcend the boundaries of the natural world as it is described in natural science. Different to his earlier works, where he justifies religious beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reason, in *VRE* – and also in other later works like *The Pluralistic Universe* – James argues on an epistemological basis. The analysis and philosophical interpretation of religious experience ends up in a critique of scientific materialism, which claims to include the whole range of reality. Scientific materialism neglects the subjective part of each experience and as a result it presents the objective part as an abstract idea of reality, which is present to us in our experience. But to understand religious experience, you have to be more ‘radically empirical’ than science and develop a concept of world as a whole which makes it possible to consider religious experiences to be true.

[...] the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow ‘scientific’ bounds. (*VRE*, p. 408)

In this respect religions and theologies present a more refined world-view than science does, because they emphasize also the inner subjective part of experience. What often is considered to be a ‘anachronism, a case

of “survival”, an atavistic relapse into a mode of thought which humanity in its more enlightened examples has outgrown’ by the critics of religion, from a really humanistic point of view could be seen to be a merit of religion: The assumption that there is a God above allows space for the assumption that the divine meets the individual ‘on the basis of his personal concerns’ (*VRE*, p. 387).

CONCLUSION

Especially in his later work, James construes religious experience in a dedicated realistic way. In my opinion this is necessary, if one likes to base religious beliefs on feelings or emotions on the one hand and to avoid judging these beliefs as illusions on the other hand. For religious beliefs can’t be proved in a scientific manner, you need a concept of reality which transcends the world of science. In science there is one moment which is in itself by definition not part of this world and that is the mental moment of experience wherein all science is founded. If you accept this origin, the field of reality will open up wide and there is no more reason to think of the experience of a higher self or God to be unreal, if a wide range of individuals all over the world and thousands of years had these experiences.

Maybe some critics of religion and atheists are quite aware of the consequences which a true theism would entail. The assumption of a supernatural personal God can’t be seen as further supplement to or behind the natural world, moreover it would change the whole naturalistic world-view as such.

But the realistic interpretation of theism is not the only way to speak of religion as being true. There is also a culturalistic view, which is for example preferred by Franz von Kutschera. He eliminates all supernatural elements, which Kutschera calls ‘mythological’, from religion or more precisely from Christianity. From this point of view religious experience isn’t to be seen as an experience which transcends the natural world. Under these premises feelings and emotions are nothing but epiphenomenons which may accompany religious belief, but will disappear in that stage of religiousness which Kutschera calls a ‘matured faith’. But if this kind of religious faith would have the power to fashion a whole life is a question which is raised by Kutschera himself at the end of his book: ‘A [second] obstacle to the mature Christianity may be that

religious faith has to be based deeply in the region of feeling and passion to be able to form a person's life in all respects. Human beings are not only reasonable beings, the faculties of passion and will are important in the same way. But maturity is only an intellectual ideal. A mature faith is not able to address the feelings and longings of human being, not shape their experiences, not comfort mourning and not share their happiness ... Mythological religions with their legends and holy rituals immediately appeal to the realm of feeling and passion. Their interpretation of the world and history are comprehensible through experience. This basis of immediate is lost in the stage of maturity.¹⁰ And this is the reason why James is voting for the 'anachronistic' type of religion.

But Kutschera also emphasizes that the 'ideal of maturity' didn't aim for the 'right of way to reason'. The aim is to have the individual freedom to handle his feelings and emotions, which presupposes to reflect them.

But it is also possible to interpret James' achievements in 'The Will to Believe' from that point of view. Religious beliefs could be understood as a possibility for which there is no obvious reason. For they are not proven to be false; you have the free choice to adopt them or not. If one chooses to believe because he considered faith to be the best option for living, or on the basis of personal subjective experiences, he might do that. And in most cases, even in a time and environment where it is not natural or even obligatory to belief in God, he probably made this choice on the basis of some reflection, so that the idea of mature Christianity does not, from my point of view, contradict the acceptance of some mythological elements in it, which are able to appeal to our inner life of passion and deep concerns.

The instantaneous type of conversion James put in the centre of his study on the varieties of religion maybe isn't that typical as he – growing up in a time and a region of the world where awakening-movements had

¹⁰ Loose translation by the author of this paper. 'Ein zweiter Einwand gegen ein mündiges Christentum lautet: Religiöser Glaube muss auch im Gefühl verankert sein, wenn er sein ganzes Leben bestimmen. Der Mensch ist kein reines Verstandeswesen, Fühlen und Wollen sind ebenso wichtig wie Denken. Mündigkeit ist jedoch ein bloß intellektuelles Ideal. Ein mündiger Glaube kann die Menschen nicht in ihrem Fühlen und Streben ansprechen, ihr Erleben nicht prägen, sie in ihrer Trauer nicht trösten und in ihrer Freude nicht begleiten ... Mythische Religionen sprechen das Gefühl mit ihren Bildern, Legenden und heiligen Handlungen unmittelbar an. Ihre Deutungen von Welt und Geschichte lassen sich im Erleben nachvollziehen. Diese Gefühlsunmittelbarkeit geht mit dem Schritt in die Mündigkeit verloren.' (Franz von Kutschera, *Was vom Christentum bleibt*, p.142.)

their origin – thought it to be. And maybe the idea of adopting religious beliefs by a cold blooded act isn't a realistic case of becoming religious. However I think some general characteristics of the process of adopting religious beliefs are given in his studies: First: It is necessary to think of religious claims as assumptions or hypotheses that might be true even if not in a literal sense, or in the words of William James, they have to be considered as living options. Second: If you are convinced that it is always wrong to believe in something which has the power to touch your heart, you never will come to be religious believer for it seems to me that religious beliefs always are linked with a special taste which makes you feel more placid. Third: The confrontation with typical religious questions like that of the existence of God, of life after death, of evil and retributive justice will always worry human beings. Maybe not every person reaches a faith-state or maybe a faith-state isn't such a stable state of mind, as one may think when reading the examples given by James. But to face up to these questions, even if one comes to atheistic answers at the end, is an honest and matured form of using your intellectual capacities.

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