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The Varieties of Contexts for Reappraising The Varieties. . .

Most authors of articles in this issue reflect on differences between the world into which William James dropped his book in 1902 and the world in which readers can confront it in 2002.

Here and there are mentions that imply he was speaking in a climate where many hearers and readers were indifferent to, suspicious of, or hostile to explorations that dealt with anything coded with words such as 'transcendent', 'mystical', 'spiritual', or 'religious'. Such mentions are in place. One can sense the psychologist clearing his throat, shifting on his feet, and perhaps figuratively raising a protective arm as a shield against verbal missiles that would be hurled by audiences or readers. To deal with some medieval mystics was one thing; to take seriously the upstart and often, among academics, unrespectable movements such as Christian Science was another. It could expose him to ridicule and hurt the scientific and philosophical communities in which he was a leader.

Between the turn of the last century and the turn of this one, historians of culture agree, James would have had an ever worse time carrying on his explorations or making his points. The world, which meant the world of the academy, media, arts, and often politics, was periodically described as secular, and growing ever more relentlessly so. Whatever else 'secular' meant, it implied the freedom to ignore or oppose scholarship other than historical that dealt with the transcendent or the mystical. Those were years of 'secular theology' or 'the death of God' movements or, simply, turnings of the back on mysticism and inquiries concerning it for pragmatic reasons or less discernible ones that came with the ethos.

If there are occasional hints of 'decline and fall' or diminuendo in this field, these cannot rise out of careful analysis of the empirical situation. However serenely ignored all forms of religion may be in many sectors of the academy, the clinic, and the laboratory, significant numbers of scholars are turning their attention to the question of the role religion plays in human consciousness and expression. There is no need for contributors in this issue to apologies for making these inquiries.

A second element in the issue of context has to do with inquiry concerning the issue of why James did not find more broad acceptance among psychologists then and why authors like these have to engage in acts of retrieval now. Not that everyone was hostile. In preparing a short introduction to a paperback version of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* I was led to become curious about the original reception. Astonishingly, some reviews prophesied that it would be the most durable book in its field a century later.¹ Admittedly, we may not have a James among us now, but who can picture greeting anyone's book today risking the prophesy that during the next ninety-eight years nothing would come along to surpass it.

Still, while the book was a path-breaking book, not many followed James down the path. The fields associating psychology and religion, other than the reductionist methods often associated with Freudianism, cannot be described as having prospered. And among psychologists today, those who speak well of the agenda and preliminary findings of James are on guard. Why did it make its impact more on religious studies scholars, lay publics, and cultural historians, than among psychologists?

Here it is in place to revisit the issue of science and the past. George Steiner has described the disciplines as Janus-faced.² In general, the humanities look backward. It is not likely that someone more determinative for the humanities than Shakespeare or Plato is 'out there'. Humanists may look ahead, but their raw material is seen *sub specie praeteritorum*, that is, in the conspectus of the past. Philosophers and literary scholars no less than historians, because they deal with texts, look backward. For them, *Varieties* remains a feast for exegetes, hermeneuticians, and historians.

The sciences, meanwhile, attract forward-looking scholars. Steiner mentions that a second-grader today may outstrip Euclid or Pythagoras in calculating, or would find them irrelevant. They belong in Great Books courses of the humanities, not in the laboratories or clinics. Science, by its nature as a field of experimentation, testing, and innovation, junks much of the past. So much of what James explored over one hundred years ago is too dated, it has too often been transcended, for it to become attractive to most depth psychologists. William James himself thought the book 'will doubtless be a popular book — too biological for the religious, too religious for the biologists' (Marty, 1982, p. xviii).

Yes, one other reason adduced by some of the writers here does deserve re-exploration. That is, even where scientists are ready to revisit James and his kind — are there others of his kind? — they do face both cultural and integral hurdles if they want to take religion and 'the transcendent' seriously. The late

[1] See Marty (1982), which cites *Public Opinion, Congregationalist, The Nation, Sewanee Review, Journal of Theological Studies, The Dial, and Outlook*. In *The Dial*, to T.D.A. Cockerell it seemed 'a work of genius, admirable alike for the thoughts expressed and the manner of expression', and 'certainly one of the great books of our time'. *The Nation*, two months after publication, said it will occupy 'the position of a classic' and was 'epoch-making'; it 'may easily come to mark a new era in the history of thought'.

[2] See Steiner (1984): 'The humanist is a rememberer. He walks, as does one troupe of the accursed in Dante's *Inferno*, with his head twisted backward. He lurches indifferent into tomorrow.'

David Larson, student of this situation spoke of the ATF (the ‘Anti-Tenure Factor’), that played into the neglect of religious studies in the human sciences and clinical affairs.³ Yes, let some at the edges of the discipline undertake some risk; let them have their hobbies. But when it is time for serious work, they should keep mysticism at a distance. That is what we mean by the cultural bias, one that is no doubt less inhibiting than it was even a few years ago, but has to be noticed.

The other reason for diffidence in approaching the subject of religion in scientific contexts is based in what I just spoke of as ‘integral’ dimensions. Readers of this journal and amateurs like myself — much of my reading in this area is about this area, in reviews such as those that appear in the *Times Literary Supplement* There, year in and year out, science reviewers might be open to every question of cosmology, even suggesting now and then that ‘A Theory of Everything’ is out there.

When it comes to the study of human consciousness, however, many of them step back and suggest that in the nature of the case it is likely that satisfying ‘final’ explanations will be elusive if not hopelessly out of range. Consciousness is consciousness of something, and being conscious of consciousness leads one into circular issues: can we ever know, it is asked, whether my blue is your blue, in matters of perception?

Compound that difficulty with efforts to link consciousness in depth psychological explorations of the transcendent. James could speak of the ‘thither’ where religious consciousness posited or experienced the Other, or the Truth, or hints of both. But could one with any scientific method follow him there? Can one, using such methods in their most expansive extreme, break what I call ‘the circle of immanence?’ To do that would be to display *ignoratio elenchi*, a category mistake.⁴ I am an historian and a believing cleric. I can step into a chapel and, in a mode appropriate to religious discourse, testify to the reality of transcendent orders, and data that comes with divine revelation or the providential hand in history. An hour later I can be in the history classroom where I have spent most of my life and find no way qua historian to speak of anything more than what people have experienced and what they have testified to.⁵

Thus ‘consciousness’, ‘consciousness of’, and ‘consciousness of the transcendent’ as directed in mysticism, work within limits. So far as I can tell, the writers in this issue all know that, and work within such limits. Some of them may be mystics and have mystical experiences, but they do that as moonlighters. In the daylight of their laboratories and clinics and studies, they address mysticism and mystical experience on disciplinary lines, even if they stretch them more than many might. As I read these articles in advance of publication, I could only

[3] David Larson mentions ATF in numerous essays, some published by the John Templeton Foundation; he was widely published and was running an institute on these subjects at the time of his premature death last year.

[4] On *ignoratio elenchi* and ‘the circle of immanence’, see Oakeshott (1933), p. 5.

[5] For two elaborations of my theme that historical methods cannot penetrate into realms of transcendence and be ‘certifiable’, see Marty (1978; 1992).

applaud the ways they showed awareness of limits and displayed an unwillingness to let them be inhibitions to venturesome and, one expects, profitable inquiries. The humanist in me says it is not likely that anyone in their generation in 2002 is likely to come up with a classic like James's *Varieties*. The admirer of scientists in me says that their explorations are likely to throw light on consciousness, varieties of experience, and the human adventure. To the degree that the present company are contributors, they are paying worthy tribute to William James who, if not 'the father of them all', is certainly a pioneer, a survivor.

References

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