

WHY WILLIAM JAMES "STOOD BY" GOD

BY III SIMONS

MATTHEW ARNOLD had the temerity to deny, in the lecture on Emerson which he addressed to his first audience in Boston, that his subject deserved place among "the legitimate poets" or the great men of letters or the philosophers. Yet in one of his letters home he remarked that his hearers, among them Miss Emerson, were satisfied that he rested the preacher's claim to the gratitude of many generations on the simple grounds that, like Marcus Aurelius, Emerson was "the friend and aider of those who would live by the spirit." Insofar as his lectures on "The Varieties of Religious Experience" represent him, William James merits the same classification.

It would be uncharitable not to acknowledge his charity toward "the intellectual cripples and the moral hunchbacks," as Professor Santayana has referred to James' "cases." His discourses are pre-eminently a study in "the relativity of different types of religions to different types of need." He responded with quick sympathy to any "spontaneous need of character."—

Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help! No prophet can claim to bring a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these. But the deliverance must come in as strong a form as the complaint, if it is to take effect; and that seems a reason why the coarser religions, revivalistic, orgiastic, with blood and miracles and supernatural operations, may possibly never be displaced. Some constitutions need them too much.

James' recognition that "The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use;" his vigorous denial of objective truth as a criterion by which the validity of religion is to be judged, and his substitution for this of religion's efficacy in relieving, or fulfilling, "a pro-

found interior need of many persons," led to this conclusion:

Taking creeds and faith-state together, as forming 'religions,' and treating these as purely subjective phenomena, without regard to the question of their 'truth,' we are obliged, on account of their extraordinary influence upon action and endurance, to class them amongst the most important biological functions of mankind. . . . 'The truth of the matter can be put,' says Leuba, 'in this way: *God is not known, he is not understood; he is used*—sometimes as meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness asks for no more than that. Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.'

At this purely subjective rating, therefore, Religion must be considered vindicated in a certain way from the attacks of her critics. It would seem that she cannot be a mere anachronism and survival, but must exert a permanent function, whether she be with or without intellectual content, and whether, if she have any, it be true or false.

This is the positive outcome of James' examination of the phenomena of religious experience. It has proved important. Following his recapitulation of earlier and contemporary investigations, and his emphatic statement of his own findings, later students, with the more powerful and precise instrument provided them by a larger body of psychological data, have defined religion as a function of the nervous constitution whereby an individual compensates himself for deficiencies in himself or in his relation to his environment. To have adumbrated this conclusion justifies James in his non-traditional method of handling the subject, even to his gullible tenderness for the most mopsy of his specimens.

II

Plainly, a corollary of his idea of religion is that a person who feels no deficiency in himself or his circumstances, or at least none that he cannot rectify by the exercise of other functions, will not need or have a religion. This proposition is scarcely less important than the one from which it proceeds. For the only evidence of the existence of a function is its operation. If some human beings do not manifest the phenomena of religion, this function cannot be regarded as a constant element in human character. In this case one of two things is true: either experience can be lived satisfactorily

without dependence on such a function, or the shortcomings of life can be made up to the individual who suffers them by some other kind of activity that is like religion in some respects but yet different in others.

This question, whether religion is *the* means of revising the errors of circumstance, as the pathetic fallacy suggests that they be regarded, or whether it is merely a *possible* way out of difficulties, is of more than academic interest. Considered solely by James' own standard, its degree of usefulness as a guide in conduct, the answer is important. For religion needs no justification to the person whose sole sustenance is its fruit. The one most concerned in its establishment or disestablishment as a primary, autonomous function is the man or woman whose every tradition exhorts to its profession but whose intellect prompts to dismiss or ignore it. To such the problem is real enough.—Life attracts with a multitude of goods that may be had for the getting. I must choose the finest, the surest of them to try for. Even after this elimination, the effort will fill an arduous lifetime. I must strip for it—must throw off every impediment. Is the faith of my mothers such a superfluity? Or is the universal experience of mankind such that I had better keep this thing—if not actively practice its use, at least retain it in deference to a possible emergency?

James offered little explicit counsel on such a dilemma. In his first lecture on conversion he said:

Some persons . . . never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted. Religious ideas cannot become the centre of their spiritual energy. . . . Such inaptitude for religious faith may in some cases be intellectual in its origin. . . . In other persons the trouble is profounder. There are men anaesthetic on the religious side, deficient in that category of sensibility.

Is the intellect inept in religious faith deficient, or is the capacity for faith a saving supplement to an intellect otherwise incapable of relieving its own embarrassments? James only answered by inference. According to the empiricism that formed the platform upon which his whole discussion was conducted, insusceptibility to faith would be a defect in a character that radically needed saving and could be saved by nothing but faith. Granted. But two questions remain unsettled: Will anything but faith save such a character? and, are all characters such as need saving or, eventually,

will stand in that condition? It will be apparent presently that James did not beg these questions: for a reason, he neglected them. It has remained for later pragmatists to discover that art, which he treated only by a reference to its service as ritual ornament to religion, and the philosophies that desiderate unity, spirituality, eternity, immortality of the soul and freedom of will, are functions that may perform the same office ascribed to religion. These thinkers also have been brilliantly clear in the contention that defects of experience arising from an interior confusion of the personality may be overcome by the cultivation of the function of intelligence, and that maladjustments of individuals to their environments may be removed by concerted social action. In this is a positive answer to the corollary James ignored.

III

But why did he ignore it? The fact is that James did not consider the case of the man who does not need religion because he did not believe that such a one existed. In the quarter-century since these lectures were delivered and published, James has got a great reputation for what he called "healthy-mindedness," for a specially balanced and unobjectionable optimism—for what more simple optimists vaguely denote as "wholesomeness." The virtue has been imputed to him because of his charity and because his private belief coincided to a remarkable degree with the common faith that predominated in his time. "He seems to have felt sure," Santayana observes, "that certain thoughts and hopes—those familiar to a liberal Protestantism—were every man's true friends in life." This is true: in view of the universal propensity to regard agreement with one's self or one's sect as righteous and genial, it is clear why James was accepted as "wholesome" and optimistic. But the truth is that he was profoundly pessimistic. There are marks of this fact throughout the book; this extract is representative:

To suggest personal will and effort to one all sicklied o'er with the sense of irremediable impotence is to suggest the most impossible of things. What he craves is to be consoled in his very powerlessness, to feel that the spirit of the universe recognizes and secures him, all decaying and failing as he is. Well, we are all such helpless failures in the last resort. The sanest and best of us are of one clay with lunatics and prison inmates, and death finally runs the robustest of us down. And whenever we feel this, such a sense of the vanity and provisionality of

our voluntary career comes over us that all our morality appears but as a plaster hiding a sore it can never cure, and all our well-doing as the hollowest substitute for that well-being that our lives ought to be grounded in, but, alas! are not.

If this credo is insufficient to categorize its author among his "sick souls," there is plenty of additional evidence that he belongs among them. Optimism has undashed confidence in the individual's ability to correct discrepancies between wish and natural circumstance. This mood was alien to James at bottom.—

If one has ever taken the fact of the prevalence of tragic death in this world's history fairly into his mind,—freezing, drowning, entombment alive, wild beasts, worse men, and hideous diseases,—he can with difficulty, it seems to me, continue his own career of worldly prosperity without suspecting that he may all the while not be really inside the game, that he may lack the great initiation.

This being his view, James could hardly be counted on, were he living now, to support the program Professor Dewey proposed in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. A man who must confess this as his final conviction is likely to overlook the possibility of the existence of others, no less averse than himself to articles of "healthy-minded" faith that are callow though merchantable, who are conscious of no need for compensatory religion. And, by his rule that "the deliverance must come in as strong a form as the complaint, if it is to take effect," one must look for a profound manifestation of religious feeling in one who could say, "Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony."

IV

Not in any marked idiosyncrasy of James' personal "over-belief"—for, as Santayana has recognized, it was far from unique—but in the extraordinary lengths he went to, to firm-found and fortify it, is to be found evidence of this profundity. His need of a faith impelled him to a final absolute that is a little shocking in contrast with the sustained empiricism of his previous discourse.

"Disregarding the over-beliefs, and confining myself to what is common and generic," he said, in recapitulation of his conclusions, "we have in *the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come*, a positive con-

tent of religious experience which, it seems to me, *is literally and objectively true as far as it goes.*"

This reassurance must have been consoling to those who had been warned in the preceding lecture that "we . . . must bid a definite goodbye to dogmatic theology" and that "In all sincerity our faith must do without that warrant." The consolation cost its minister a dialectical and a psychological error.

". . . is there," he asked, "under all the discrepancies of the creeds, a common nucleus to which they bear their testimony un-animously?"

This he answered affirmatively.—

. . . there is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of . . . (1) a sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand. . . . (2) a sense that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers.

Then he amplified.—

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness, . . . is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exist. Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ. . . . when . . . the stage of solution or salvation arrives, the man identifies his real being with the germinal higher part of himself. . . . *He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.*

Then presently he inquired:

Is such a 'more' merely our own notion, or does it really exist? If so, in what shape does it exist? Does it act, as well as exist? And in what form should we conceive of that 'union' with it of which religious geniuses are so convinced?

To be acceptable so fully as to form a center for all an individual's psychic energies, a religious belief must be so formulated as to avoid conflict with any active current of that force. So it is natural that James found a way to make his answer accord with the technology that was his habitual instrument of operation: "we shall do well," he said, "to seek first of all a way of describing the 'more,' which psychologists may also recognize as real. The sub-

conscious self is nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity; and I believe that in it we have exactly the mediating term required."

James was no man to shirk the duty of illustrating how his term would apply. He continued:

Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life. Starting thus with a recognized psychological fact as our basis, we seem to preserve a contact with 'science' which the ordinary theologian lacks. At the same time the theologian's contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as 'higher'; but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally, true.

It is to be noticed that here the existence of a higher-than-the-individual power and the mutual relation of it and the individual are candid postulates, while in the concluding statement that was quoted previously they are hypostatized as "literally and objectively true." Moreover, the ordinary theologian does not contend that an external power is "suggested" to men nor that union with it is "sensed"; he holds that such a power *is* and that its manifestations are of its essence and so independent of human sense. But the most important thing to be remarked is that James' hypothesis is tautological. For the "subconscious self," whether or not it be "higher" than the conscious, ordinary self, is, still, self. It might appear that James was attempting to distinguish between the two selves by asserting that the "subconscious," or "higher," is, unlike the other, in immediate working relation with a more diffuse and more powerful extension of itself. But the existence of this cosmic extension of powers superior to those of ordinary humanity is just what wants proving. It is not proved by the hypothecation of an agency between it and the individual through which the two appear to communicate.

This difficulty is more than logical. The supposed entity is eliminated by a plain re-statement of the psychological impasse which James believed himself to have resolved.—One is in difficulty, and cannot escape from its consequences by one's own powers; so one invokes an external helper:—the call is responded to, not by anything actually external, but by another part, a usually (ap-

parently) inoperative part, of one's self. This may or it may not meet one's need; those in whom it is likely to do so are, as James himself demonstrated, persons in whom the intellectual function is less developed than are the emotional and imaginative propensities. To the intellectual temperament, mere multiplication of metaphysical terms is a singularly repugnant kind of hoodwinking. Whether or not the process proves efficacious in the cases of various persons, it certainly does not establish as fact "that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come."

V

Especially, when the glibly accredited but here insufficiently described entity is examined. What did James mean by "the sub-conscious self"? There can be no doubt that he was talking about what his successors in psychology know as "the unconscious." In his first lecture on conversion, while discussing sudden irruptive manifestations of the phenomenon, he explained his preference for the term since then discarded.—

We shall ere long hear still more remarkable illustrations of sub-consciously maturing processes eventuating in results of which we suddenly grow conscious. Sir William Hamilton and Professor Laycock of Edinburgh were among the first to call attention to this class of effects; but Dr. Carpenter first, unless I am mistaken, introduced the term 'unconscious cerebration,' which has since then been a popular phrase of explanation. The facts are now known to us far more extensively than he could know them, and the adjective 'unconscious,' being for many of them almost certainly a misnomer, is better replaced by the vaguer term 'subconscious' or 'subliminal.'

Concluding his treatment of conversion, he identified his conception explicitly.—

The ordinary psychology, admitting fully the difficulty of tracing the marginal outline (of consciousness), has nevertheless taken for granted, first, that all the consciousness the person now has, be the same focal or marginal, inattentive or attentive, is there in the 'field' of the moment, all dim and impossible to assign as the latter's outline may be; and, second, that what is absolutely extra-marginal is absolutely non-existent, and cannot be a fact of consciousness at all. . . .

I cannot but think that the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science is the discovery, first made in 1886, that, in certain subjects at least, there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories,

thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs. . .

In the wonderful explorations by Binet, Janet, Breuer, Freud, Mason, Prince and others, of the subliminal consciousness of patients with hysteria, we have revealed to us whole systems of underground life, in the shape of memories of a painful sort which lead a parasitic existence, buried outside of the primary fields of consciousness, and making irruptions thereinto with hallucinations, pains, convulsions, paralyses of feeling and of motion, and the whole procession of symptoms of hysteric disease of body and of mind. Alter or abolish by suggestion these subconscious memories, and the patient immediately gets well. . . . They throw, as I said, a wholly new light upon our natural constitution.

And it seems to me that they make a farther step inevitable. Interpreting the unknown after the analogy of the known, it seems to me that hereafter, wherever we meet with a phenomenon of automatism, be it motor impulses, or obsessive idea, or unaccountable caprice, or delusion, or hallucination, we are bound first of all to make search whether it be not an explosion, into the fields of ordinary consciousness, of ideas elaborated outside of those fields in subliminal regions of the mind. . . .

What does the substitution of the proper term, the unconscious, with the fairly ascertained quantum of facts it defines, do to the proposition that "the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come . . . is literally and objectively true?" It clarifies beyond any possible confusion the relationship between the ordinary self and the "higher" or "wider" or somehow "better" self. It deodorizes James' still vaguer synonym for these latter terms—"higher powers"—of the cosmic and extra-human aroma which was faintly present in it, even as he used it. And it reduces the "higher" or "better" self to the status which he determined in his first lecture.—

When we think certain states of mind superior to others, is it ever because of what we know concerning their organic antecedents? No! it is always . . . either because we take an immediate delight in them; or else it is because we believe them to bring us good consequential fruits for life.

That James should have fallen into this confusion indicates the intensity with which he sought to vindicate his personal faith, and consequently the urgency upon him of his need for its vindication. Beyond this, it illuminates the temper of the man—charitable toward others because of his wish for charity toward himself, impatient of dialectic because, as others have pointed out, he was unskilled in its

use. Also, despite the great heap of data that forms the bulk of these half-a-thousand pages, one is disappointed with his handling of them. He used cases like a lawyer, to prove his points; not as one expects a scientist to do, setting out the facts, allocating them in their general classifications and then analyzing them to their minutiae to discover their significance. Referring to the sense of the reality of the unseen, he says, "for the psychologists the tracing of the organic seat of such a feeling would form a pretty problem." Well, he was a psychologist: why did he not attempt, at least, to solve it? He quotes pages of Tolstoy's record of his perplexities, with the banal conclusion that the subject suffered from a melancholy induced by general and objective circumstances: one reflects upon the finesse with which Dr. Freud would have analyzed the delicacies of cause and effect involved in the case. In more than a few instances James seems to neglect the plain duty of the psychologist for the more attractive and sympathetic office of befriending "those who would live by the spirit." So in the particular part of his thesis under discussion: "If the grace of God miraculously operates," he said, "it probably operates through the subliminal door, then. But just *how* anything operates in this region is still unexplained. . . ." Why did he not explain it, rather than step outside his special field to mediate between dogmatic metaphysics and distressed humanity? The answer is implicit in his character: it does not absolve him of the error of hasty generalization.

However, his concluding absolute does not invalidate his whole conception of religion; its discovery only restores the subject to the empiricism in which it was conceived originally. In many persons, a *sense* of salvation from inward wrong *is* produced by the mechanism of the unconscious, and the same agency does "*suggest* to the Subject an external control." In such persons one part of the self—if the operation must be conceived this way—does assist another evidently inefficacious part of the self, and therefore seems to be an agency outside of and ineffably superior to the self as ordinarily known. Psychoanalysis, in short, does not abolish religion as a beneficent, and a direly needed, experience in many lives—those, say, of "the intellectual cripples and the moral hunchbacks." But for others there is nothing in the empiricism of William James that makes the cultivation of any of the varieties of religious experience either desirable or inevitable.