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RELIGION'S EXPERIENCED SELF

A review of Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

CHARLES TAYLOR IS ARGUABLY one of the most significant philosophical and political theorists of our time. In the near future, historians will find themselves faced with the challenge of assessing how his work helped us interpret the collective consciousness of modernity. With great lucidity, Taylor manages to bring to light how the voices of the past impinge upon the current state of our collective identity. Such a sense of intent is evident in his early works on the life and thought of G.W.F. Hegel and continues to follow in his works such as his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), his edited volume (with Amy Gutmann) *Multiculturalism* (1994), and his *Philosophical Arguments* (1995). Time and time again, Taylor manages to call our attention to the determinative assumptions that define our existence together.

Taylor's most recent work, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, is a continuation of his investigation into the nature of our common sense existence. This text brings to light the enduring manner in which the works of James' *The Will to Believe* (1896) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) define the process of interaction that occurs between perceptions of selfhood and perceptions of religiousness. Taylor's dependence upon social anthropology as an overriding critical perspective allows certain elements related to this process to go underappreciated. By contrast to intellectual history, philosophy, or even theology, the methodological perspective of social anthropology proves incapable of viewing religion as something more than a phenomenon with either social or existential import. However, I must offer that I make this critique of Taylor's work in light of the critical tools which Taylor himself, through his previous writings, graciously afforded me.

Before we turn our attention to an overview of Taylor's work, I would like to address in greater detail the overriding critical perspective which runs through this important reconsideration of the legacy of William James. Beyond references

to the important works of theorists such as Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber, Taylor's argument concerning the significance of William James is dependent upon the efforts of Emile Durkheim. Such a sense of dependence comes to light in Chapter Three: *Varieties of Religion Today*. In this chapter, Taylor distinguishes between what he calls the paleo-Durkheimian and the neo-Durkheimian links between religion and the state. The paleo-Durkheimian phase relates to a time (for example, the Baroque era) when the state was dependent upon religion for its identity. By contrast, the neo-Durkheimian phase relates to a time (for example, our current era) when religion is present in the implied intentionality of the design of the state. This overriding critical perspective allows Taylor to highlight the significance of James' efforts in light of what Taylor calls his two-pronged Jamesian thesis. First, "the real locus of religion is in individual experience, and not in corporate life."¹ Second, "the real locus is in experience, that is, in feeling, as against the formulations by which people define, justify, rationalize their feelings (operations that are, of course, frequently undertaken by churches)."² This two-pronged thesis gives shape and definition to the four chapters comprising Taylor's book.

In chapter one, Taylor advances his two-pronged thesis by placing James' work in its original socio-historical context. First, Taylor makes the claim that one can trace the origins of James' argument concerning religion as a personal form of experience back to the high Middle Ages. Taylor claims that from that point forward, "we can see a steadily increasing emphasis on a religion of personal commitment and devotion over forms centered on collective ritual."³ In some ways, James was describing a growing form of practice that had captivated the North Atlantic region for several generations. However, Taylor also claims "We can situate him [James] further in another branching: he sides with the religion of the heart over that of the religion of the head."⁴ Taylor claims that this element of James' work originates during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century with a growing sense that the inextricable linkage shared by right emotion and right practice superceded right thought. As a result, religion, during James' era in time, and arguably enduring to at least our own era in time, is vested in practices that resonate with how a person individually interprets and acts upon his or her religious sentiments.

In chapter two, Taylor moves from his effort to situate the socio-historical context of James' efforts to an assessment of the heart of James' argument. For Taylor, the heart of religious experience is embedded in what James referred to as the sick

¹ Charles Taylor. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002): p. 7.

² *Ibid.* p.7.

³ *Ibid.* p.9.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.18.

soul. This form of religious consciousness manifests itself in one of three different forms: melancholy, fear, or an acute sense of sin. The essence of these experiences is not vested in one's ability to come to a point of homeostasis in any one of these forms of religious consciousness but to work through it. Beyond any one of these forms of religious consciousness one finds what James referred to as a new birth in life. While James' argument concerning this understanding of religion is important, Taylor points out that what may prove to be of equal or greater importance involves the immediate context in which James made his argument. In a similar manner, both Friedrich Schleiermacher and William James made their respective speeches to religion's cultured despisers. For James, religion's cultured despiser was William Clifford and his work *The Ethics of Belief* (1879). Taylor highlights the fact that James (particularly in *The Will to Believe*) argues against Clifford by arguing that a lack of empirical evidence should not deter religious belief. Humanity simply needs to find the will to persist and find truths (religious) that are not immediately evident.

In chapter three, as previously stated, the overriding critical perspective giving shape and form to Taylor's argument becomes most evident. Taylor moves from his discussion of the heart of James' work to how this work still appears to be relevant today. Taylor establishes this sense of relevance through the references of paleo-Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian that he borrows from social anthropology. These references bring to light some of the underlying concerns Taylor possesses about how religion manifests itself—especially at a point in history when “the presence of God no longer lies in the sacred, because this category fades in a disenchanted world. But he can be thought to be no less powerfully present through his design.”⁵ In a cross-cultural sense, Taylor points out that this transformation in terms of religion has occurred in different ways in different places. However, in the North Atlantic region, particularly in the United States, religion is manifested in how an individual's experiences become the ground for claims of authenticity. Drawing upon his previous scholarship, Taylor claims this expressivist outlook vests itself in the notion that the “religious life or practice that I become part of not only must be my choice, but must also speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this.”⁶ However, Taylor's previous work and his current socio-anthropological focus lead him to question the plausibility of such a truly individual form of experience.

Finally, while Taylor shares in chapter four that he is convinced that the enduring legacy of James' work is vested in its ability to shed light upon the current nature of religion or religious experience, he also believes James “is still

⁵ Ibid, p.66.

⁶ Ibid, p.94.

missing something important.”⁷ First, neo-Durkheimian manifestations of religious practices will continue to find themselves distinct from an increasing number of social connections. For example, the nation-state and the family will begin to show decreasing rates of intergenerational religious continuity. Second, the neo-Durkheimian condition may penetrate only so far in various subgroups (be they religious and/or ethnic). Taylor cites the manner in which Polish and Irish Roman Catholic populations formed themselves into political entities also made them susceptible to various forms of Neo-Durkheimian influence. Third, Taylor ends his work by claiming that James underrated the manner in which persistent Neo-Durkheimian religious aspirations may expressively define themselves. For Taylor, “Many people are not satisfied with a momentary sense of wow! They want to take it further, and they’re looking for ways of doing so.”⁸ While neither James nor even Taylor can completely predict where such a search will lead, they can help us understand that such a search will invariably continue.

While Taylor’s employment of concepts such as paleo-Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian afford him with several important insights concerning the enduring legacy of James’ efforts, perhaps his overriding dependence upon these distinctions from social anthropology also limit these insights. One of the lessons I must attribute to Taylor is the way his writings prodded me into simultaneously reading the one’s argument at the level of its particularity and at the level of its constructive assumptions. Intellectual history, philosophy, and theology each provide increasing levels of insight into James’ work in addition to the levels of insight afforded by social anthropology. In terms of intellectual history, the revolutionary dimensions of James’ *The Will to Believe* and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* are perhaps more readily evident when such efforts are seen in light of his previously published *Principles of Psychology* (1890). In this work, James establishes “his presentation of psychology with allegiance to the biological perspective, and offers materialism as a plausible hypothesis.”⁹ Prior to the publication of James’ *Principles of Psychology*, this area of inquiry was understood to be the study of the human soul. Under the influence of James, psychology becomes the study of mental life.¹⁰ As a result, one cannot help but wonder how James’ method and his work concerning religion have shaped even the way we approach religion today.

By placing his discussion of religion within the context of shifting approaches to

⁷ Ibid, p.111.

⁸ Ibid, p. 116.

⁹ Daniel N. Robinson. *An Intellectual History of Psychology* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1976): p.310.

¹⁰ Louise L. Stevenson. *Scholarly Means to Evangelical Ends: The New Haven Scholars and the Transformation of Higher Learning in America, 1830-1890* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986): p. 85.

psychology, James' efforts concerning religion offer another level of significance that Taylor may have chosen to explore philosophically. James' reliance upon modern approaches to psychology leaves him in the position of speaking of experience as a means of discussing religion with its cultured despisers. However, the mere possibility of this understanding of experience is one which comes at a great price. As previously discussed, social anthropology affords Taylor with the ability to assess the plausibility of a truly individual form of experience. However, such an approach fails to contend with what makes James' assertion concerning a truly individual form of experience possible in the first place. Philosophically, the possibility of such an assertion is more disconcerting than its plausibility. The possibility of such an assertion points us to the reality that perhaps, even for James, nihilism has replaced religiousness. As Martin Heidegger claims "The loss of the gods is so far from excluding religiosity that rather only through that loss is the relation to the gods changed into mere 'religious experience.'"¹¹

The sense of loss that leads James to resort to arguing for a truly individual form of religious experience also propels James to substitute psychology for theology as a means of speaking of religion and its related experiences. This sense of substitution propelled James to overlook the importance of doctrinal commitments to religious adherents. Stanley Hauerwas argued, "It simply never seems to occur to James that the doctrine of the Trinity might have bearing on how one understands creation or on why our knowledge of God's predications rests on analogy."¹² Taylor's implementation of social anthropology as his overriding critical insight allows him to assess and detail the significance of the shift in religious experience from being social in nature to being individual in nature. However, social anthropology finds explanations for religion by placing religion somewhere on this evidentiary dialectic. Theology, by its nature cannot be relegated to what James referred to as pure theory. Theology, by its nature, not only collapses the modern dialectic of the theoretical and the practical but also the communal and the individual. As a result, a theological assessment of James' work would possibly provide an insight concerning just why one's understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is infused in one's sense of religious identity.

Charles Taylor is one of our generation's most important voices in philosophical and social theory. His most recent work, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, is the latest installment in an impressive intellectual agenda defined by Taylor's penchant to awaken us to our common assumptions. Thus, while

¹¹ Martin Heidegger. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans. William Lovitt. (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): p.117.

¹² Stanley Hauerwas. *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001): p. 75.

Taylor's work provides important insights into the enduring significance of the works of William James, Taylor's selection of social anthropology as an overriding critical perspective also brings with it various limitations. By its nature, historical (intellectual), philosophical, and theological interests exist beyond social anthropology's line of sight. Taylor's thesis concerning the locus and nature of religious life provides an important viewpoint to anyone interested in the experienced self as it exists at the crux between modernity and post modernity.

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