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Charles Taylor’s Varieties of Religion Today consists of a set of Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh nearly a century after William James’s famous lectures on the same subject of religion. As one might gather from Taylor’s title, his lectures do not merely revisit the same questions of religion as James addressed in 1901 and 1902, but they do keep James’s ideas very close to heart. The basic issue Taylor confronts is the one of thinking through the idea of a personal religious experience, which James had defended as the foundation of all spirituality, in an age that seems to sacrifice the deeper and more rigorous meanings of spirituality to an all-encompassing ethic of consumer authenticity. Accordingly, we might wonder about what remains of spirituality if the very constitution of the self has been absorbed by the superficial, transitory pleasures of commodified goods. At any rate, this review keeps to the basic logic underpinning this kind of question while simultaneously responding to Taylor’s concerns from what I believe to be James’s central position.

Throughout James’s Varieties of Religious Experience a deep individualistic perspective is developed. What is privileged, more than ritual or tradition, is the direct relationship between the solitary person and whatever is perceived to be divine. If there is indeed a fundamental religious experience, then it will need to be traced back to this immediate relationship. This implies, at least for James, that institutional forms of religion are inspired by religious geniuses and prophets who lead the rest of us. While a few of us are divinely familiar with the universe around us, ordinary religious believers are trapped by conformist, unreflective, stultifying modes of social behavior. So the energy and passion of an unadulterated spiritual experience is diluted in its organized repetition. It is not so much that James has denied the reality of either theology or ecclesiasticism, but they are mediated versions of an original experience that can never be shared with others. Churches are invariably created around the teachings of divinely inspired individuals, but this ritualistic transmission covers over the insights and feelings first associated with those teachings. Something vital is lost in the translation, and much of James’s work in this regard is focused upon the paradoxical communication of what appears to be ineffable, transient, and passive.

Taylor looks elsewhere for the primary sources of religion. What seems to be overlooked by James is the possibility that our religious life can be strengthened by our social connections with others. From an empirical point of view, James’s thesis appears to be at odds with certain collective and ritualistic practices. Taylor thus writes, “What James can’t seem to accommodate is the phenomenon of collective religious life, which is not just the result of (individual) religious
connections, but which in some way constitutes or is that connection. In other words, he hasn’t allowed a place for a collective connection through a common way of being” (24). What is missing in the Jamesian account is an explanation for those religious connections that are fundamentally social. Not every form of institutional religion is nefarious. To the contrary, it may be that we find inspiration in precisely those forms of worship that are only made possible within a social context. A sacramental communion, for example, cannot be properly understood apart from its historical nexus of meaning. There is a whole range of possibilities associated with the church when it is thought of as a unified sacred entity, yet this exceeds an isolated relation to the divine. But Taylor is making a stronger point as well. While the Jamesian perspective fails to provide us with a plausible explanation of socially determined religiosity, it also falls short of grasping the inherently cultural aspect of any experience (26). Drawing from Hegel and Wittgenstein, Taylor makes the familiar argument that experience is impossible unless we think of it as belonging to a socially mediated environment. It would thus appear that James’s theory of personal religion, as contrasted with what he calls the institutionalized side of religion, cannot make sense of the historically embedded nature of experience. James does not argue that individuals are unaffected by their cultural horizons, but he does seem to think that we can abstract one side of religiosity from the other in order to attain a clear, direct communion with whatever is taken to be absolute. The problem for Taylor is at least twofold: 1) religious life which turns on a collective practice of devotion fails to be adequately explained; and 2) the very idea that we can imagine experience apart from its theoretical and social transmission is impossible.

This way of putting the problem, however, only underscores the ontological aspects of experience, or what might also be called the nature of experience. Taylor would also like to bring to our attention some of the historical and psychological consequences of an individualistic version of religion. This isn’t to say that he collapses all personalized variations of religion into an ineluctable homogenous reality: there is, after all, more than one version of individual religious commitment. Nevertheless, Taylor does observe a modern historical trend. He writes in his third Gifford Lecture, “Religion Today,” that we have entered into a new phase of spiritual life in the last half-century, one that is dominated by a widespread expressive individualism (79-80). This stage of spirituality is the result of many historical factors, including the overall dominance of individualism throughout the modern age, a Romantic influence stemming from artistic and intellectual elites in the nineteenth century, as well as the more recent developments in a capitalist economy geared toward the consumer (80). In this quickly spreading postmodern consumer culture, the need for mutual help and common action has dropped significantly. After the Second World War, a proliferation of consumer goods made it less and less necessary for us to rely upon one another in times of need or hardship. Our individuality, more than ever, was solidified and privatized due to the democratization of goods and services: what was once reserved for the especially wealthy became accessible to all. This in turn has led to new means of communication. Insofar as we are identified as customers, as purchasers of the good life, we tend to express ourselves through what we buy. In an ever-expanding world of lonely consumers, the prevailing social imaginary has shifted the terms of communication away from the public sphere of common action to another which emphasizes self-display (85). Without a doubt we still need others, but our need has been transformed into a superficial desire that others participate in this mutual display of individuality. We gain a certain satisfaction from knowing that others, although sometimes a select group of others, are able to recognize the self-identity which we are expressing through our display of clothes, cars, and homes. This wouldn’t be so upsetting, however, unless we believed, as Taylor does, that the expression of
individuality is compensating for a loss of another kind of communication which would better serve our needs.

Our deepest needs, especially in this context, pertain to the religious realm. If it is true that the modern age is moving closer and closer to a post-Durkheimian outlook (97), then what does that imply for us in terms of the attendant spiritual risks? First and foremost, we typically measure the validity of religion in direct relationship to our subjective feelings and attitudes (98). Objective validity is no longer paramount. We now look within ourselves to experience and feel the truth of religion: external authorities, worldly or otherwise, are helpful but not essential. So the defining spiritual risk of our age is linked to the very way in which we approach our own needs, as if they could be satisfied along the lines of an undemanding, self-absorbed immediacy. To the extent that we regard our religious propensities on the model of consumer individualism, it becomes impossible to prevent our spiritual life from sliding into the despair of nothingness which so accurately reflects the free-floating personalities of purchased postmodern subjects. It is not clear, however, that this mode of consumer nihilism should in any way be compared to James’s articulation of religious experience. There may be overlapping qualities, but if we look closely at James’s complex and extended definition of religious experience (as it evolves during the course of his lectures in 1901 and 1902), it is evident that a universal principle pertaining to either God or nature is essential to his notion of personal religious experience. Moreover, the principle must also be incorporated into the experience so as to produce a dynamic process of self-transformation, one that embraces the pain and suffering of existence without thus falling prey to melancholy. Religious experience, in this way of thinking, is ultimately affirmative: it absorbs the meaning of death and tragedy in such a way as to reconcile all abstract differences and contradictions. We should be wary of attributing a carefree attitude to James, when his own delineation of the religious subject is intimately bound up with a process of affirmation that presupposes the loss of individuality to a truth that is far greater than any of us. Taylor is genuinely respectful of James, and he is careful not to simplify his position. But it still seems inaccurate to identify James with an individualistic, emotive outlook when that outlook is itself focused upon an infinite power of nature that cannot be reduced or explained within the scope of any finite, anthropomorphic, individual perspective.

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