

PRAYER AS FUNDAMENTAL AND PERSONAL RELIGIOUS ACT

A Philosophical Inquiry

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1. Introduction

The advent of William James (1842-1910) on the American scene marked a turning point in the approach to Philosophy of Religion. His preparation of the essays, *The Will To Believe* (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), was guided by the conviction that the significance of a belief should be judged not by its "sources, but by its fruits."¹ The result was a massive change of emphasis from an almost exclusive involvement with dogma and the external forms of religion to a sympathetic and respectful concern for the religious experience and its most fundamental and personal act, prayer.

2. Common Content of Religions

Prayer, for James, is "the very soul and essence of religion."² Prayer is religion in act, and without prayer religion would be merely external, like a body without soul. It is prayer that distinguishes religious phenomenon from similar phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment; and, for Saint

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¹This conviction itself was rooted in James' philosophy of 'pragmatism'. For James, 'pragmatism' is primarily an attitude of mind, which expresses itself in the form of a method. The briefest and most comprehensive formula for the method is "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles and categories; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, and facts." See, John Dewey, "What does pragmatism mean by practical?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 5,4 (1908), 85.

²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Dolphin Books, 1902, 404.

Thomas, "prayer is more perfect than any other acts of religion."³ However, James' approach to prayer in the context of religion is different from that of tradition and scriptures. According to him, any attempt to determine the nature of prayer/religion will necessarily involve an analysis of religious experience – which, in turn, involves an analysis of human needs and urges, which cause the religious sense to arise. He, therefore, advocates an empirical approach, an approach of analysing the religious responses present in wo/man than the phenomenon of religion as such.

a. Prayer as petition

According to James, such an analysis of religious experience would reveal that religion necessarily contains two factors: "a). An uneasiness, and b) Its solution."⁴ The uneasiness is an awareness of the fact that "there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand," and the solution consists in the realization "that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers."

James feels that these two aspects of religion – namely, the feeling that there is "something wrong" with individuals and their lives in the society, and that this can be put right through a 'relationship with higher powers' – can be described as the "common content" in which religions appear to meet. A religious philosophy, for James, therefore, must be based on an apprehension of this common content of all religions.

The prayer of primitive men and women (as in animism) arose from concrete environmental needs in which the vital interests – either of the individual or the community – were at stake, and it was mostly directed toward material objectives. Longing for delivery from their predicaments, primitive men and women turned to higher, mightier beings, through religious and magical rites and ceremonies. To make them yield to their desires, they used every means of persuasion – praise, adoration, thanksgiving, allurements, flattery, apology, lamentation, etc.

A survey of the aetiology of the origin of religions would also reveal this common content of religious experience. Popular Hinduism was concerned with the problem of *samsāra*, the bondage of birth and rebirth, whereas the intellectual Hinduism addressed the question of *avidya*

³Saint Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Blackfriars, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970, 2a 2ae, 83.3.

⁴James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 508.

(ignorance or illusion). In Judaism, the cause for the 'feeling of uneasiness' was slavery in Egypt: "I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cry. I have come down to deliver them" (Ex 3:7-8). Buddhism – whether a way of life or religion – was a response to the fact of human suffering (*duḥkha*) – sufferings of old age, sickness and death.

Hence, the commonest form of prayer was the *petitionary* prayer, which was concerned with human well-being – material, social, psychic or spiritual. As a matter of fact, the English word 'prayer', which is derived from the Latin verb *precari*, means literally a 'petition' or 'request'. Although the word may be used to mean a petition made to anyone, in its customary use, it stands for a petition made to God or some holy person reigning with God. Some prayers contain, in place of a petition, an outpouring of our emotions of praise, joy, or gratitude. Even when petition is not the central activity, it is always implicit in any kind of prayer to God. Prayer as petition is what Levinas calls, "a religion of needs" whose core is a sort of sacred egoism.⁵ However, such a religion is nevertheless an expression of human reality, insofar as the human being recognizes that it is itself finite and, therefore, seeks to relate to a 'higher' and 'extraordinary' power.

b. Prayer as communion

Petitionary prayer, for James, is only one department of prayer. Hence, he uses the word 'prayer' in the wide sense as meaning "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."⁶ Accordingly, religion is described as "an intercourse, a conscious and voluntary relation, entered into by a soul in distress with the mysterious power upon which it feels itself to depend, and upon which its fate is contingent."⁷

James' description of prayer, in this wider sense, is very much similar to that of tradition and scriptures. Tradition tries to define prayer as an "ascent to God," and scriptures speak of "pouring out the soul before the Lord" (I Sam 1:5), of longing for God as "a deer longs for flowing streams" (Ps 42:1), and of "lifting up the soul" (Ps 25:1). Here we may recall two

⁵Emmanuel Levinas. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1987, 38-39.

⁶James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 464.

⁷James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 464.

classical definitions of prayer: (a) "Speaking to God or Christ" (which has been a spontaneous description of prayer since the Apostolic Fathers)⁸ and (b) "the lifting up of the mind to God" (*Oratio est ascensus mentis in Deum*), which is generally attributed to John Damascene.⁹

At this juncture, it may be argued that the particular task, which humans themselves have to perform, is to construct a fresh understanding and practice of petitionary prayer corresponding to the type of relationship we enjoy with God. Only then petitionary prayer in the concrete can avoid being a "troubling of the gods" and be really prayer to God, when it consists in that opening of the heart so as to respond to the inconceivability of God. In the words of Levinas, "far from being a demand addressed to God, prayer consists in the elevation, surrender and *adherence* of the soul to the heights."¹⁰ James' working definition of religion, perhaps, provides us with such a fresh understanding and strong impetus for practice of prayer/religion.

3. An Analysis of the Definition of Religion

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James defines religion as "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men [and women] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."¹¹

a. A total reaction/response

The initial reference to "feelings, acts and experiences" reflects the many dimensions of human life that are involved in religious experience. James, in his definition, gives due regard to all the aspects of our mental life: cognitive, affective and conative. He was aware that religion would comprehend certain cognitions, involve certain types of feelings and express itself in certain conduct and behaviour. It implies a 'total reaction', a total commitment of the self to the object considered to be the 'divine'.

⁸Karl Rahner, *The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1975, 1268. *Imitation of Christ* (II. 8) offers also a simple description of prayer as "the great art of conversing with Jesus."

⁹*Patrologiae Graecae Tomus*, vol. 94, 1086.

¹⁰Emmanuel Levinas, "Prayer Without Demand," in Sean Hand, ed. *The Levinas Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 232-33.

¹¹James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 31.

It also implies a sense of *absolute dependence* on the object of religious experience, for one would not commit her/himself to that object, if s/he could live independently of it. In brief, when wo/man relates to God, the whole person – the intellect, the will and the emotions all play a part. Prayer, thus, becomes a fitting worship to God, which has been interpreted by Hartshorne as “loving God with all one’s heart and all one’s mind and all one’s soul and all one’s strength.”¹²

However, feeling, for James, is the most important ingredient of religious experience. By “feeling” he does not mean a sense of “pleasantness or unpleasantness,” but he uses the term to denote “the state of being affected by the cognition of an object, which may bring about pleasantness or unpleasantness.” It seems that James takes feeling as an immediate experience, and the immediate response to the object of religion has to be a feeling-response. It is in this sense that feeling comes to represent the essential core of religion. He observes that “religion is essentially private and individualistic; it always exceeds our powers of formulation.”¹³

In fact, Schleiermacher, along with many thinkers of the Romantic Movement, conceived religion as purely an affair of the heart, “the feeling of absolute dependence” (*Abhängigkeitsgefühl*), which he believes to be the absolute irreducible feature of religion.¹⁴ The “consciousness of being absolutely dependent,” for him, is same as “being in relation with God.”¹⁵ But such an attitude has dangerous consequences: (a) It leads to the bifurcation of reason from other human faculties, and (b) religion becomes a totally subjective affair in which ‘anything goes’. Here, in the words of Jan Van der Veken, “religion becomes no different from liking or disliking strawberries, a matter of taste.”¹⁶

Against certain voluntarists, like Hugh of Saint Victor, who regard prayer as an affective motion of the will, St. Thomas holds that “prayer, in its

¹²Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection*, La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1973, 40.

¹³James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 430.

¹⁴F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1928, 18.

¹⁵Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 12.

¹⁶Jan Van der Veken, “Meaning and Reference of the Word ‘God’,” Course Notes on ‘Philosophy of God’ (Spring 1992), 10.

strict sense, is an act of the intellect."¹⁷ Although both intellect and will are operative, prayer is formally of the intellect, because the role of the will is to move the intellect to make the petition. James himself is aware of the fact that "feeling is private and dumb," and, therefore, the need to construe our feelings intellectually. Theologies and dogmas are the results of spontaneous and natural construction by the intellect on the feeling-contents of religion. However, these philosophic and theological attempts are always considered as secondary processes, which, in no way, warrant the veracity of the sentiments from which they derive their own stimulus, and borrow the conviction they possess.¹⁸

b. A personal/dialogical relation

The emphasis on 'solitariness' echoes on the subjective or personal dimension that characterizes religious experience. James shifts the centre of religion from collective life to the 'individual'. He feels that religion is discernible in the life of the individual wo/man – that too in her/his 'solitude'. For religious response is essentially a consequence of the individual's apprehension of her/his relation with what s/he considers to be the 'divine'.

Prayer is, thus, conceived as a communication between an 'I' and a 'Thou' – whether it is verbal or non-verbal, whether it finds no outward expression at all or is expressed by gestures only, whether it is offered by an individual or performed collectively by a group, whether it is a spontaneous creation of the moment or a fixed, stereotyped prayer formula. It is this person-to-person, dialogical relation to God that makes religion a personal experience.

Such a dialogical relationship establishes a bond between the 'I' and the 'other' without constituting a totality.¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas calls this a "covenantal relationship," which is possible only in a covenantal religion. He proposes this religion as the authentic and mature one, for only the covenantal religion can sustain a relationship in which the identity of the 'same' and the radical alterity of the 'other' are preserved: "... the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no

¹⁷Saint Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, 83.1.

¹⁸James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 430-31.

¹⁹Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, 79-81.

community of concept or totality – a relation without relation – we reserve the term religion."²⁰

Heidegger's philosophy, if interpreted theistically,²¹ provides us with sufficient material to construct a genuine philosophy of religious experience. According to Heidegger, Being calls us into 'existence'²² and wo/man experiences this call fully, only when s/he commits her/himself to this call unconditionally in an act of personal response. This personal response is based on human recognition that her/his existence is a free gift from the loving hands of God with whom s/he can speak and be related in an act of personal commitment. But, since existence is a gift given to human collectivity, this response has to be collective as well. Prayer is, thus, both individual and social. The theological reason for this is the unity of the Spirit, who animates each of the individual believers.²³ However, the believers should not forget that the ultimate meaning of collective prayer is to lead the individual to God.

4. Characteristics of Religious Experience

In tune with his pragmatic method, James asserts that the proper way to judge the significance of religious experience is by assessing its fruits, which are manifested in human lives. That is why James gives much value to such experiences as 'saintliness', which somehow has the effect of changing the life of an individual, and of making the lives of others better.

James clearly explains, at least, two kinds of characteristics – 'religious' and 'psychological'. The former includes the attitude toward the world, the higher or spiritual realm and also 'inner communion'. Under the latter come the character of religious zest and earnestness and that of love and compassion. Implicitly, he also refers to religions' role of answering the problems of meaning.²⁴

a. Religious and psychological significance

The sense of the 'divine' makes one aware that the visible world is part of a

²⁰Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.

²¹See John Macquarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity*. London: SCM Press, 1994, 16ff.

²²Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 67.

²³Rahner, *The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, 1275.

²⁴James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 466.

more spiritual universe. Whoever possesses strongly this sense thinks that the smallest details of this world derive infinite significance from their relation to an unseen divine power. The thought of this order yields him a superior mode of happiness (bliss), and a steadfastness of soul with which no other can compare; and 'union' or 'harmonious relation' with the 'divine' is considered to be his goal of life and the true end.²⁵ Prayer or inner communion with the 'divine' is a process, wherein work is really done and spiritual energy flows and produces effects, whether psychological or material, within the phenomenal world. For James, prayer is religiously valuable, only when it serves as a function of life.

James also enumerates certain psychological attributes associated with religious beliefs. "(a) A new zest, which adds itself a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism. (b) An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections."²⁶ Moreover, in James' view, the saintly lives exhibit several fruits of religion, such as felicity, purity, charity, patience, self-severity, etc. in the best possible measure. In social relations, their service is exemplary. Their help is inward as well as outward, for their sympathy reaches souls as well as bodies, and they turn their back on nobody, however thankless s/he may be.²⁷

b. Function of meaning

As indicated above, religions serve the function of answering the problems of meaning.²⁸ The first and the most obvious function is that of *cognitive* meaning. Religions are required to give a descriptive account of the reality that human beings experience. In other words, they are required to explain the unexplainable, particularly in providing cognitive structures for events that have no natural or material explanation. The function of religion in this regard is to help enhance the quality of life of believers.

²⁵James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 369.

²⁶James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 485-86.

²⁷James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 369-70.

²⁸See Kanika Khandelwal, "Religion: A Psychological Construct and Its Psychological Relevance," in S. M. Tripathi, ed. *Religious Positivity*, Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2001, 175-188; Colin Campbell, "A New Age Theodicy for New Age," in Linda Woodhead, ed. *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge, 2001, 74-77.

Secondly, there is a function that is associated with *emotional* meaning. In addition to indicating what general attitude or emotional tone individuals should take toward life and universe, religions should also offer more specific guidance on what individuals should feel and under what circumstances. In this respect, religious beliefs and values assist individuals to handle their emotions, by offering a framework of meaning that enables men and women both to experience catharsis and to translate such negative feelings as fear, anxiety, or despair into the positive ones of calm, confidence and optimism.

The third function of religious beliefs is concerned with *moral* meaning. Here religions should provide guidance on how individuals should act or conduct themselves in the world. The moral function of right or wrong, good or evil, just or unjust is validated by religious doctrines. Religious beliefs and values, thus, regulate the exercise of moral freedom and responsibility between self and others. In brief, religions tell people not only what to *think* and *feel* about the world and themselves, but also indicate what *actions* they should perform in order to become 'acceptable' in the world and in relation to the 'divine'.²⁹

5. "Whatever They May Consider the Divine"

The key to the distinctiveness of religious experience lies in the phrase "to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." According to James, the 'divine' or 'the more' as we call it and the meaning of our 'union' with it, form the nucleus of any enquiry of religious experience. Specification of the reference to the 'divine' expresses the concept of the *transcendent*, which is generic to many of the theories of religious experience.

a. Nature of the 'Divine'/the 'More'

Those who believe that the transcendent has a reality of its own have identified it with "the Universe" (Friedrich Schleiermacher), "the Holy" (Rudolf Otto), the "Wholly Other" (Soren Kierkegaard), the "Being beyond-being" (Paul Tillich), and with other realities. On the other hand, those who deny its objective reality often admit, nonetheless, that belief in the *reality* of the transcendent is characteristic of religious experience. Some identify it with "the collective unconscious" of wo/men (Carl Jung), the "projection of

²⁹Campbell, "A New Age Theodicy for New Age," 76.

human imagination" (Feuerbach), wo/man's "higher/ideal self" (Erich Fromm), and so on.

James does not, however, define the 'divine' in terms of theistic traditions (as in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam), which conceive God as infinite and omnipotent and as capable of doing anything and everything. He rather describes the 'more' in terms of the "subconscious self": "The more with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the sub-conscious continuation of our conscious life."³⁰ Moreover, James argues that, it, firstly, vindicates theologian's contention that the religious wo/man is moved by an external power, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasion from the sub-conscious region to take an objective appearance and to suggest to the subject an external control. Secondly, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true, since it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind, which are controlling.³¹ Whatever be the descriptions of the *divine*, all would agree that there is 'something', which goes beyond the individual, in/by which s/he transcends her/his finite conditions.

Now, the question is whether the religious consciousness is only *potentially universal* or is it *actually* so? What is demonstrable from both believers and non-believers is that humankind as a whole has been incurably religious. Freud acknowledges that what Schleiermacher calls religious, viz., "the feeling of absolute dependence," is indeed a universal experience. Literary existentialists, like Kafka and Beckett, also reflect modern wo/man's longing for God. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a reflection of Heidegger's phrase "waiting for God." Sartre's designation of the fundamental human project as "the desire to be God" is a clear indication of the essentially religious character of wo/man. Walter Kaufmann stresses the same point more dramatically, when he says, "Man is the ape that wants to be God." In view of all these considerations, it seems safe to claim some kind of 'universality' for religious experience.

b. Reality of the 'Divine'/the 'More'

The more critical question, however, does not relate to the universality, but to the *reality* of religious experience. Is there really a transcendent to fulfil

³⁰James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 512.

³¹See William James. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Longman, 1911, 122.

the needs which wo/men sense? Or, is it a mere absurd project, "a useless passion" of wo/man to realize God? Various forms of "theistic reductionism" have in common the claim that the proper use of theistic language (namely "God") does not involve affirming that God, in fact, exists. For example, Braithwaite thinks that "God" does not refer to an existing entity; nonetheless, it is used in worship, since it is effective in "promoting good moral behaviour."³²

Another form of reductionism takes its most thoroughgoing expression in the works of D. Z. Phillips. For instance, Phillips says, "The difference between a man who does and a man who does not believe in God, is like the difference between a man who does and a man who does not believe in a picture."³³ If so, are the enlightened believers to think that the object of their worship and prayer is a pure concept or fiction? Or, is it possible consistently to live in the mode of worship, while at the same time thinking that the reality of God is truly conceptual?

First of all, it is difficult to assume that not only some wo/men have been deceived about the reality of God, but that all 'religious' men and women, who have ever lived, have been completely deceived into believing that there *is* a transcendent, when there really *is not*. Secondly, if worship is a relational activity in which the worshipper relates in a special way to the "Focus of Worship,"³⁴ or an activity of addressing God (as a 'Thou'), it involves the practical affirmation of the related as capable of responding with actions of its own originating from itself. That is, it involves the assumption of the reality of the related, or addressee, as an "In-itself" reality.

If God were not conceived as existing in-itself, then the concept "God" could *not* have its reasonable use as one through which a life of 'communion with' is enjoined. One does not believe 'God is real', just insofar as s/he worships him. On the contrary, the believer worships God because s/he believes that God's reality requires it. If the believer thinks that God is only an effective presupposition necessary for living the life of faith, then the believer's experience and action within her/his life of faith will change: S/he

³²R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in Basil Mitchell, ed., *The Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971, 72-91.

³³D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, 89.

³⁴Ninian Smart, *The Concept of Worship*, London: Macmillan, 1972, 44.

will *no* longer live her/his life as a communion with, but as *pretending* at communion with. The affirmation of God's existence, then, is essential to the actual life of religion, to an authentic life of faith and love in action.