

A Commentary on the Relevance of Charles Taylor's Critique of William James: Varieties of Spirituality and Religion and their Relevance to Psychopathology

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Abstract

Charles Taylor's Gifford lectures published as *A Secular Age* has stimulated much discussion. In preparing for his lectures Charles re-read the Gifford lectures of William James. He wrote *Varieties of Religion Today* as an appreciative criticism of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this commentary I address Taylor's criticisms of James in terms of relationships between institutional and individual religion, belief in God, and psychopathology in a secular age.

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Introduction

James's [1] classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* has continued to influence psychologists since it was initially delivered as Gifford Lectures at the beginning of the 20th century. Taylor's own assessment in his *The Varieties of Religion Today* [2] was an essential preamble to his own Gifford lectures published as *A Secular Age* [3] more than a hundred years after James's lectures. It is critical while applauding its "unparalleled phenomenological insight" and acknowledging "how little dated it is" [2] but bemoaning its lack of treatment of religion. In this brief commentary the dispute between James and Taylor frames the importance of possible relations between religion and psychopathology in a secular age.

Taylor is indebted to sociologists such as Durkheim for his focus of the collective while James is rooted in his own psychology for his focus on the individual. More than one psychologist has noted that if James were writing today, his lectures would undoubtedly have been entitled *Varieties of spiritual experience* [4]. Fuller [5] holds William James to be the exemplar of what it means to be "spiritual but not religious". Taylor identifies himself as both religious and spiritual [2]. Thus, the issue between James and Taylor is between religion as an individual expression as opposed to religion as a social expression.

Taylor argues there are three things James failed to anticipate in a secular age. First, Taylor argues that American denominationalism rooted in the Protestant experience can quickly degenerate into

"the feel-good and superficial" [2], the typical charge against the spiritual but not religious type. However, Taylor misses the considerable empirical evidence that individual religious experience does often end in a liked-minded set of believers. Individual experiences identified in some totalizing aspect that is directly recognized—an event or episode that is "experienced" in response to a sense of ultimacy and transcendence [6]. This experience is often confused with standing only in opposition to a more dogmatic community of believers in the negative sense of the mere insistence of particular beliefs who often form the religious but not spiritual type that Taylor worries about. However, such experiences remain implicitly religious and in tension with established religion [7]. If we note that Taylor's Vienna lectures (the basis of his own *Varieties* text) were in celebration of Hans-Georg Gadamer's birth, we can do no better than to quote Gadamer [8] in defense of the Jamesian point that experience is absolutely authoritative for the experienced person:

The experienced person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he [or she] has had and the knowledge he [or she] has drawn from them is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.

Thus, specifically religious experiences are a more restricted range from the diversity that characterizes spiritual experiences [7]. Experience often have a specific religious framing (and hence are *religious* experience in which the person identifies as both religious within a specific denomination and *spiritual*. However, when it is not specifically religiously framed the person identifies as *spiritual but not religious*. Religious experience is open to individual interpretation and may as Taylor notes divorce religion from issues of power that can be imposed upon experience other than in ways provided by civil religion. In America this means one has absolute freedom of religious belief but practice is enforced by constraints and prohibitions that must ultimately be secular. As such, experiences risk being identified as psychopathological by medical criteria that formed the basis of James's critique of "medical materialism" [1] (pp.17-21). Why, he notes, cannot religious experience be both psychopathological and genuine?

Second, Taylor's treatment of the shallowness of much merely spiritual experience that is neither religious nor psychopathological is itself too shallow. Many people who are spiritual but not religious will find themselves joining extremely powerful religious communities, because that is where many people's sense of the spiritual will lead them" [2] (p. 112). Streib and Hood [7] have argued that spirituality as an emic term, shows great individual variation, but as an etic term it functions as an implicit religion and fuels both sectarian and cultic forms of religious communities some of which are deemed psychopathological. Thus, whether an experience is religious or spiritual depends partly on the context and the interpretation of the experience. It is in this sense that even if what is experienced is both immediately present and unquestionable to the experiencing subject, the epistemological value of the experience is dependent upon discursive meanings that entail public interpretations [2,9]. In America, the Supreme Court has never successfully offered a definition of religion beyond that linked to James' authoritativeness of experience, sincerely interpreted. This is a neo-Durkheimian solution, anticipated by James as positive and treated by Taylor as problematic largely because it is merely part of a "culture of authenticity" in which individual interpretations lack guidance from the magisterium of a church (in terms of Taylor's own Catholicism) or other established social groups that do not stand in opposition to medical assessment of psychopathology in a secular society.

A third concern expressed by Taylor is the continuing existence of neo-Durkheimian identities many of which are quasi-agnostic. Bullivant [10] sees atheism as best identified by "*an absence of belief in the existence of God or gods*. However, as Martin [11] notes there are as many varieties of atheism as there are of theisms being rejected. Furthermore, complexity is added when the degree of certainty of belief denial is considered with positive atheists more certain of their denial while negative atheists are less certain and shade into forms of agnosticism [7].

The empirical psychological study of those who never develop a belief in God or who come to reject a belief in God is just beginning in America but has for some time been explored in European nations, many that are more secular than America [12]. The estimates of the number of atheists worldwide vary significantly

(measures of over half a billion worldwide are conservative [13]. Gervais argues atheists are the fourth largest "religious" group after Christians, Muslims, and Hindus [14]. However, it is not obvious that given the variety of atheisms discussed below, atheists should be classified as an expression of religion but are worthy of study in their own right [12]. Some are neither religious nor spiritual, but many are spiritual but not religious. While some atheists can be defined by the theism they reject, not all can. Likewise, the claim that some atheists must have a God representation [15] must be tempered by cultural considerations to avoid premature claims to psychopathology. As Farias [16] has cautioned, scientific studies of atheism in the United States are heavily influenced by America's religious culture in which atheists are an "exotic group." Here we caution that exoticism is not to be equated with psychopathology.

Varieties or Types of Atheism: The Mirror Image of Religious Psychopathology?

Given the dynamic nature of the religious field, it is not surprising that efforts are underway to produce a more complex typology of the varieties of atheism. Silver, Coleman, Hood & Holcombe [17] have proposed six types of atheism based upon in depth qualitative interviews with non-believers in the United States. Based upon extensive interviews (minimum of 1 hr) and using a modified version of Fowler's Faith Development Interview. A typology of varieties of atheism or "types" of atheist was constructed. It was then used in an online survey as part of a quantitative exploration of psychological correlates of the typology.

In the United States most types of non-believers have deconverted from a faith tradition [7]. It is likely that the reasons for deconversion can be associated with emotional distress and may involve struggles with God that may but need not be viewed as pathological [18,19]. However, for others deconversions are simply a consequence of rational doubt [20]. Both Taylor and James favor struggles, long identified with the "twice born" of whom Luther is James' favorite example. The focus on varieties of atheism suggest as with theism, reasons for belief or unbelief vary and so one cannot expect a simple relationship with psychopathology. For instance, in the Silver et al. study, using a multi-dimensional measure of anger it was found that only the anti-theist group differed significantly from the intellectual atheist agnostic group suggesting the new atheists are as dogmatic as some religious fundamentalist are authoritarian [17]. It is not without some truth that the names most associated with popular psychological critiques of belief in God (Dawkins, Dennet, Harris & Hitchens) have in turn been dubbed in popular culture as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Other patterns of difference between atheistic types on a variety of measure suggest that not all theistic types can be lumped together under any single explanation [17]. This is consistent with evidence suggesting atheism can be treated partly as an individual difference variable, often associate with openness [20,21].

Clearly Taylor's dialogue with James speaks to our time. His vision is broader than most, but by rising to such heights where

everything merges into a dynamic whole (hence Taylor's use of Typologies) the nominal categories that hide as well as reveal. William James thought that from his own refusal accept the natural science limitations imposed by psychology upon itself, a broader reality would emerge. He too knew well of expressive individualism feed from claims to psychopathology. In a sweet comment on typologies as a mean of classification and supposed clarification he remarked:

Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such thing," it would say; "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone" [1].

While we must appreciate the great work Taylor has provided us, we ought to take with a grain of salt his comment that, "It might seem that our post-Durkheimian is a pragmatically Jamesian one. Individuals make what they can of their religious experience" [2]. He is wrong to make this so cavalier and his sociology is too Durkheimian to appreciate the psychological depths of James's empiricism. The great issues Taylor seems to suggest that always need resolution are the threat of meaninglessness, the sense that something is not right we me and/or the world and the fall

into melancholy that are the penumbra of lives lived in any of his tri-part Durkheimian dispensations Taylor discusses. Taylor's melancholy is presented in dark poetic terms. Here the sick souled must face the abyss in which for which religion of the once or twice born merge and are saved from what is otherwise mere psychopathology:

Crocodiles and rattlesnakes are this moment vessels of life as we are; their loathsome existence fills every minute of every day that drags its length along; and whenever they or other wild beasts clutch their living prey, the deadly horror which an agitated melancholic feel is literally the right reaction to the situation [22].

This quote comes not from James' *Varieties* but from James' essay, *The Will to Believe* first published in 1896. It is quoted by Taylor [2] almost as if part of the human condition to which religion continues to respond with answers that must acknowledge the individual. Religious *experience*, not simply *religion*. Even in a secular age that is fragmented and fragile varieties of religious experience are never divorced from society and in acknowledging this fundamental fact we can say of Taylor what he said James, he got so much right, but some things less so.

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