

Nature and spirit of universal religion according to William James

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Abstract

William James seeks to understand Universal religion in an entirely different way. He advocates an empirical approach to religion. The empirical approach to religion does not consist in approaching the phenomenon of religion as such as in approaching the fact of religious responses present in men. He is aware that religion is the concern of man hence any attempt to understand religion must take into account the religious feelings and urges the men.

William James believes that there has to be an object of religious experience. In a very broad sense James calls that object the divine the word divine, as we have seen, does not stand for the notion of a God. It stands for whatever the religious individual may consider to be the divine. It may be a law, or a spirit or a God or the total universe or certain ideals of actions. The chief character of this object is that the religious individual feels that there has to be a harmonious relationship between this object and his own self. This object appears to him as the goal of this religious urges and aspirations.

Thus, William James is able to show conclusively that Universal Religion is also a human response and way of life. James is able to emphasize with almost clarity is that for a proper understanding of the nature of Universal Religion, it is essential to consider the consequences of religion. Religion also will not be able to survive if it does not appear to be useful and in the true with the matter of fact attitude of the present day mind. William James takes the risk of even distorting the nature of traditional religion. James is able to realize that a dogmatic clinging to the tradition or an attempt to preserve even the outworn and dead aspects of tradition is paying a way for one's own annihilation.

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Introduction

William James seeks to understand Universal religion in an entirely different way. He advocates an empirical approach to religion. The empirical approach to religion does not consist in approaching the phenomenon of religion as such as in approaching the fact of religious responses present in men. He is aware that religion is the concern of man hence any attempt to understand religion must take into account the religious feelings and urges the men. Therefore, this essay deals about Nature and spirit of Universal Religion according to William James.

Definition of Religion

According to William James religion means, feelings, acts and experiences of Individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine ^[1].

Firstly, the initial reference to feelings, acts and experiences shows that James in giving due regard to all the three aspects of our mental life – Cognitive, Affective and Conative. James is aware that religion would comprehend certain cognitions, would involve certain types of feelings and would express itself in certain conduct and behaviour.

Secondly, It is apparent from the definition that James shifts the centre of Religion from collective life to the individual. James feels that religion is discernible in the life of individual man that too in his solitariness. It is apparent that James is not inclined to give credence to institutional forms of Religion. Collective enthusiasm, Observance of common rites and rituals, mass prayers etc., would stand only at the fringe of

religion. This religious sense would be apparent in the experience of the individual in his solitude.

Thirdly, as the definition suggests the religion response is a consequence of the individual apprehension of his relation with what he considers to be divine. This expression lays emphasis, Firstly on the individual response and secondly, on what, he calls, divine. It means that religion in the total response of an individual involving all the three aspects of his mental life, and the object of this response is the divine. James says that the word divine must not be taken in its narrow sense ^[2].

Characteristics of True Religion

It is possible for us to enumerate the basic character of religion as conceived by William James in the light of the definition of religion given above. Normally, philosophers of religion are agreed in believing that there are at least two conditions which every religion has to possess. As Rogers says "Whatever definition we may finally give to religion, there are two aspects which every religion would appear to possess. It is both a religious feeling and a theological formulation. The last phrase, in particular, may seem too ambitious one to apply to many religions; but it represents an essential fact. No religion in other words, is mere blind feeling. It always attaches itself to some object, to some way of looking at the world which can be put in intellectual terms.

On the other hand, no religion is mere theology. It may sometimes approach to this. But when it does so, at least it will be found to have grown out of what at one time was an actual religious feeling. And if it ever does lose entirely the

feeling attitude towards its doctrinal belief, we should be justified in denying that we have a religion any longer, and in calling it mere philosophy or dogma.”^[3]

But the above-given definition of religion suggests that James is not inclined to give to the second character that importance which is usually given to it. He also admits that by using the word feeling in a very wide sense it can be said that every religion necessarily has a feeling attitude or a feeling content. But even though here appears to be a theological formulation in almost all the religions of the world. James feels that this is not a primary religious activity and that it is only a second order activity. Therefore, he feels that doctrinal belief or theological formulation is only secondary to religion and that they do not represent the basic character of religion.

Keeping in mind these particular points James himself enumerates the basic characteristics of Universal Religion. He says, “Summing up in the broadest possible way the characteristics of the religious life, as we have found them, it includes the following beliefs:

- a) That the visible world is a part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance.
- b) That union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end.
- c) That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof-be that spirit ‘God’ or ‘law’-is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effect, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.

Religion includes the following psychological characteristics:-

- a) A new zest which adds itself like 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.⁴

As we can clearly see James speaks of two kinds of characteristics-(a) psychological and (b) religious. Under the former come the character of religious zest and earnestness and that of love and compassion. Under the religious characteristics are included the attitude towards the world, the higher or spiritual realm and also prayer or inner communion. Before enumerating and clarifying the characteristics of religious experience we have to remind ourselves that there are two sides of William James’ account of religious experience. The first may be termed descriptive and the second evaluative. The descriptive side concerns itself with describing what religious experience is. The evaluative side tries to evaluate the significance and validity of these experiences. At the moment we are primarily concerned with the descriptive account of religious experience and not so much with its evaluative treatment.

i) Nature of Religious Experience as Based on the Nature of Consciousness

Any descriptive account of James’ view of the nature of religious experience must begin by suggesting that his view of the religious experience is based upon his psychological view of the nature of consciousness. Consciousness, according to William James, is not an entity or a mental structure but a function. In fact consciousness is constantly in a state of flux. We can take, for our practical convenience, the cross section view of consciousness and try to form an idea about its nature. But in fact consciousness is never static ever for a moment.

One can very clearly see the impact of James’ Radical Empiricism on this point. James gives a psychological status not only to the flowing stuff of consciousness, but also to the relations that connect and organize the chain of flowing consciousness. Now this account of consciousness has a number of implications in the light of which James’ nature of religious experience can be outlined. Firstly, it leads James to believe that permanent mental entity, like Locke’s ideas cannot be maintained. Secondly, it leads to the belief that even consciousness is an activity, a function Thirdly, a very important implication of this is that he comes to believe that thinking is not a passive contemplation of its object but an active operation involving both the individual and the object of his thought. Fourthly, the reference to the individual clearly shows that thinking cannot have relevance apart from the individual’s purposes and ends. In this way James relates the nature of consciousness directly to the individual^[5]. Fifthly, this account of consciousness has a specific implication for religion. If consciousness involves feelings whose function is to cognize relation then it means that feeling is an essential accompaniment of consciousness.

Therefore, according to William James, even though feeling is an essential aspect of religion, it is not proper to distinguish religion from every other discipline on the basis of its feeling content. Now we can say that religious experience is also a form of consciousness and therefore it also involves such factors as consciousness involves, Because it is a form of consciousness it cannot be regarded as a rigidly fixed response. Religious experience is also a kind of a following experience. James tries to elaborate the nature of both these aspects of religious experience. As we shall notice in our elaboration of the character of religious experience, there are certain specific aspects of this experience that constitute the stuff or the subject-matter or the substantive part of the religious experience.

ii) Biological Basics of Religious Experience

Before elaborating the characteristics derived from James’ account of consciousness, it is essential to assert that James’ concept of religious experience has a biological basis. As an experience it originates in a particular situation and in order to meet certain emergent demands of the situation. We have seen that consciousness itself does not appear to be significant apart from the individual concern. That is true of the religious experience too. This can be proved by showing that in spite of the possibility of religious responses being varied, the fact remains that in general term similar kinds of responses are made to meet similar situation. It shows that religious response also serves a biological purpose. It enables man to adjust his life with a particular kind of situation. It is true that apparently different religious responses appear to be different. William James says, “Both thought and feeling are determinants of conduct, and the same conduct may be determined either by feeling or by thought. When we survey the whole field of religion, we find a great variety in the thoughts that have prevailed there: but the feelings on the one hand and the conduct on the other are almost always the same. Firstly, religious experience is a biological response and secondly, religious responses under similar circumstances would be different and yet, generally and in biological terms similar.

iii) The Significance of feeling in Religious Experience

James does not speak of feeling as characterizing religion essentially in an unqualified manner. Firstly, he makes a distinction between feeling as an essential aspect of Universal Religion and feeling as an exclusive aspect of Universal Religion. By this he means that feeling is essential to religions, but this does not mean that there is a specific religious feeling. Feelings are feelings and characterize religion in their normal garb. James rarely uses the term feeling in the sense of pleasantness or unpleasantness. He uses the expression to denote the state of being affected by the cognition of an object which may bring about pleasantness or unpleasantness also.

There is another characteristic related to the phenomenon of feeling. Feeling, specially in the context of religion, leans on the intellect. Feeling is private and dumb, and therefore it is unable to give an account of itself. That leads us to construe our feeling intellectually. That is why intellectual construction becomes a necessary part of our religion.

iv) Other Aspects of Universal Religion

Religious experience also includes certain volitional expressions which may later assume the form of religious act like religious rites and rituals. As we shall see, religious experience involves a consciousness of an object which James broadly characterizes as 'the divine'. This consciousness naturally has certain conative consequences. Therefore, every religion has of necessity a conative core. It is a different matter that institutional religion tries to systematize and codify these activities in certain religious codes or rites or rituals. These rites and rituals are secondary aspects of religion. But this is a fact that there are certain essential volitional expressions of religion, the nature of which may not be exactly determined.

v) The Object of Religious Experience

William James believes that there has to be an object of religious experience. In a very broad sense James calls that object the divine the word divine, as we have seen, does not stand for the notion of a God. It stands for whatever the religious individual may consider to be the divine. It may be a law, or a spirit or a God or the total universe or certain ideals of actions. The chief character of this object is that the religious individual feels that there has to be a harmonious relationship between this object and his own self. This object appears to him as the goal of this religious urges and aspirations.⁶

vi) Religious Experience Determined in Terms of its Consequences

James is aware that in order to evaluate the significance and validity of religious experience it is essential to consider the consequences that they give rise to. This, according to James, is a very important point. Firstly, because normally the nature of religion is sought to be determined in terms of the condition that causes religious experience to arise. That is to say, usually it is said that if one wants to understand the nature of religious experience he must look to the ways of its origin. That is why normally it is believed that the function of understanding religious experience is basically psychological in character. But James feels that it is not proper to explain religious experience merely in terms of its origin. The psychological

account of how a religious experience originates touches merely the surface and it is not able to go deep into its nature.

vii) Subjective Character of Religious Experience

James asserts that in a sense religious experience is both personal and subjective. In fact he prefers the expression "personal religion" to the expression institutional religion. In this regard James applies to his religious beliefs the same standard that he applies to other beliefs. Even here he says that in spite of being subjective it is not essentially individual centric^[7]. Moreover, every truth will have to give due regard to certain brute facts without recognizing the reality and validity of which it would not be possible even to live or move. Therefore James conclusion is that although religions experience pertains to the subjective life of individual, it tends to transcend the individual's subjectivism in its own way^[8].

viii) Aesthetic Elements in Universal Religion

James says that the aesthetic way of expressing religious truths creates an atmosphere in which the religious sense becomes all the more prominent. As he says. "It enriches our bare piety to carry these exalted and mysterious verbal additions just as it enriches to have an organ and old brasses, marbles and frescoes and stained windows. Epithets lend an atmosphere and overtones to our devotion. They are like a hymn of praise and service of glory, and may sound the more sublime for being incomprehensible^[9]."

Conclusion

Thus, William James is able to show conclusively that Universal Religion is also a human response and way of life. James is able to emphasize with utmost clarity is that for a proper understanding of the nature of Universal Religion, it is essential to consider the consequences of religion. Religion also will not be able to survive if it does not appear to be useful and in the true with the matter of fact attitude of the present day mind. William James takes the risk of even distorting the nature of traditional religion. James is able to realize that a dogmatic clinging to the tradition or an attempt to preserve even the outworn and dead aspects of tradition is paying a way for one's own annihilation.

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