**The Varieties of Core Experience: Some Jamesian Reflections**

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Prepared for ACTC Religious and Secular Cores Conference

Rhodes College, Memphis, TN

September 26, 2014

My title is, of course, an allusion to the title of William James’s book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*—a work of enduring importance, and also a generous book, whose generosity models in many respects the mutual respect that secular and religious core curricula ought to have for one another. It asks that science be willing to take a generous, attentive, and accepting view of the phenomena of religious experience, or at least a neutral view, even as it asks religious experience to accept the poking and prodding of secular investigators, whose investigation is underwritten ultimately by premises and vocabularies very different from its own.

Generosity is an admirable quality of character, one of the cornerstones of the civility that makes our lives together possible. But like all virtues, it needs to be pursued in moderation if it is to remain a virtue. James’s generosity was so great that it sometimes drove him to extremes: his Harvard colleague George Santayana famously mocked him for this, as in this passage from his great lecture on “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy”:

William James kept his mind and heart wide open to all that might seem, to polite minds, odd, personal, or visionary in religion and philosophy. He gave a sincerely respectful hearing to sentimentalists, mystics, spiritualists, wizards, cranks, quacks, and impostors — for it is hard to draw the line, and James was not willing to draw it prematurely. He thought, with his usual modesty, that any of these might have something to teach him. The lame, the halt, the blind, and those speaking with tongues could come to him with the certainty of finding sympathy; and if they were not healed, at least they were comforted, that a famous professor should take them so seriously; and they began to feel that after all to have only one leg, or one hand, or one eye, or to have three, might be in itself no less beauteous than to have just two, like the stolid majority.

Even allowing for Santayana’s amusing exaggerations, he has a point. James perhaps does sometimes go too far in the direction of fudging differences that ought to be observed and preserved, if science is to be science and religion religion. This may have implications for our enterprise too. After all, the choice of a “core” for one’s curriculum of study is in itself an assertion of a criterion of distinction, of priority, of “firstness,” of discrimination in favor of some organizing principle over the others on offer. When a Christian core curriculum is built around the words of Romans 12:2—“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind”—it stakes out an important difference from a curriculum that begins with Kant’s “sapere aude!”—dare to use your reason, and to emerge from the confinements of your tutelage. And yet, one can reasonably ask whether the differences are as great as they seem. Isn’t being “born again” and being “set free” by knowledge of the truth similar in many ways from the liberation hinted at in Plato’s parable of the cave? Isn’t liberal education, in whatever form, a similar process, of emerging out of the chains of illusion, and—as in the cinematic update of Plato’s allegory, the movie called *The Matrix*—hearing a voice saying, “Welcome to the Real World”?

My own view of American higher education has, for many years now, been that its institutional diversity is our greatest strength; and even though the upholding of high standards is very important, it cannot and should be accompanied by that sinister condition called “standardization,” which is the enemy of intellectual distinction and the flourishing of a genuinely vital and democratic intellectual life. So I am not in favor of privileging one kind of core over all the others. Instead, a commitment to pluralism seems a far better and more genuinely liberal path. But that does not mean that the different kinds of institutions should go their separate ways, and that we are violating the laws of intellectual and pedagogical hygiene by gathering here together. Indeed, in what follows, I am going to argue that the best examples of secular and religious cores are the ones most likely to be in conversation, in some way, with their opposite number. In other words, it is not just secular cores and religious cores that I wish to defend and uphold, but certain KINDS of secular and religious cores.

Permit me to illustrate my point with an anecdote. Some eight years ago I was honored to be invited by the U.S. State Department to give lectures in Turkey on the American understanding of the separation of church and state. Why I was chosen to do this was, and remains, a mystery to me. But I could hardly turn down the invitation, and so I went. I spoke around the country in a wide variety of venues, and met dozens of political and religious leaders. It was an unforgettable ten days, mostly for the experience of encountering raptly engaged Turkish audiences who were, partly because of the peculiarities of Turkey’s blend of Islamic character and Kemalist secularism, fascinated by the American approach to religion in the public square, and wondering whether there could be any value in adopting such an approach in their own society. (Needless to say, the same tour might yield a very different experience today. But that is another story for another occasion.)

I gave a talk, with variations, on the origins of church-state separation in American history, grounding it in the particularities of American history, including the peculiarities of the English Reformation, and making frequent reference to the riskiness of generalizing the American example to include other places and religious cultures. But my audiences almost always would ignore these disclaimers and ask me, usually in the first question or two, whether I thought this or that American practice would work in Turkey, questions I was singularly ill-equipped to answer. But such was their curiosity that they asked them anyway. And I had to try to answer them.

One encounter lingers in my mind. It occurred at an Islamic center for advanced study, located on the Asian side of Istanbul, where I was received with both endearing warmth and exquisite kindness by an impressive audience of dedicated Muslim scholars. They greeted me clutching copies of my books, and seeking my autograph, which affected me deeply. I gave them a longer and more elaborate presentation, in light of their greater sophistication, and then opened the floor to questions, which went on for an unusually long time and were unusually probing.

One woman in particular was especially interested in exploring the concept of religious toleration, and her questions cut right to the heart of the matter. Didn’t I accept the Christian view of the primacy of love? Yes, I said, I did. (I had said nothing about being a Christian, but everywhere I spoke, it was simply presumed.) Well, she continued in a gently questioning voice, how can it be love, for you or me or anyone to permit another person, someone we love, to believe something that we know to be false? Immediately there was a feeling of electricity in the room, and I thought I heard a murmur of approbation moving through the audience, and I realized that she had given voice to the very question that, in one form or another, was on everyone’s mind. She then sat down to hear my answer, but her implications were clear. How could any insistence upon toleration be anything other than an illegitimate trespass of the merely secular and political onto the sacred ground of the religious? How could toleration be a fulfillment of one’s faith rather than a dilution of it? Why was this not tantamount to apostasy, and a denial of the highest truth?

I was not really ready for such a question, particularly since I was clearly being asked to answer it as a representative of Christianity rather than as a visiting scholar. But there was no place to hide, and I could not dodge it without being rude to my gentle hosts. So I answered in terms meant to show that the liberal practice of toleration was ultimately best understood as something grounded in theology, and in an understanding of God’s nature and of man’s relationship to God. In this view, God desires our love, but He wants us to come to Him freely and willingly—not by fiat, not by manipulation, and certainly not by coercion. So He leaves us free, not only to believe but also to err and stray. In fact, the possession of this freedom—the freedom to give or withhold our love, or our faith, even from our Creator—could be thought of as an essential part of what it means to be made in the image of God. The story of the Fall of Man, I added, could be understood as a powerful expression of God’s love for us, since He loved us enough to permit us the freedom to disobey and reject him—a freedom we could never know for sure that we possessed, unless we could point to our grievous experience of abusing it.

So yes, I concluded, that is “how it can be love,” as we understand love, to tolerate error in others. Not because we are postmodern liberals who believe that all truth is pragmatic and perspectival, and that no one can be sure of anything at all, so that we must all therefore live in a state of complete epistemic suspension, lest we become fanatics who cruelly impose our subjective beliefs on others. Not because we are all followers of John Stuart Mill, secular liberals who believe in the free marketplace of ideas as the only place where truths can be warranted. Not because we are people of feeble faith who confuse what is politically or socially convenient with what is required of us by God. But instead, because the commitment to noncoercion in matters of fundamental conviction flows from a theologically grounded commitment to the fundamental and intrinsic dignity of each individual person—and to the necessity of letting that person come to God freely, in a disposition of love, in the manner of God’s desiring.

I don’t think anyone in the hall was convinced by what I said. Although they continued to be unfailingly civil and even generous. It was clear that their core commitments simply could not let them go where my core commitments sought to take them. Would the same be true of a committed Western secularist who had wandered into this hall, and was seeking an account of the basis for broad social and religious tolerance? Probably not. Yes, he or she would have different core commitments in some respects. The language would also be different. But….there would be substantial agreement about the endpoint, about the importance of individual dignity, of the principle of noncoercion, and of freedom of conscience. There would be different cores, but similar peripheries, similar operating principles, even broadly similar results.

So here is an example of several varieties of core experience, and how they interact, one very suggestive of the ways in which we in the West, with our formative tension between Jerusalem and Athens, between Romans and Kant, relies upon the existence of both possibilities, maintained as very distinct entities, and yet with the ability to be in conversation with one another, and to appreciate and cherish and defend many of the same things. This is a tension with which Americans have been very familiar for most of their history, traceable back to the Revolution and the Founding, in which both religious and secular languages were freely and even copiously adduced to support a particular political end. The effort to define the American enterprise as entirely religious, or entirely secular, has always been a fool’s errand. The Constitution’s keen awareness of human frailty, and its insistence upon the need to erect barriers against it, could be endorsed by Calvinists and secularists alike, with equal conviction. Both languages were spoken, neither trumped the other.

To get a better sense of how this could be so, it is important to be as clear as we can about what we mean when we use the word “secular.” This is not easy, since it is an old word with many meanings, not all of which involve the exclusion of the concept of God. To be a “secular” priest, for example, was simply to be out in the world, rather than confined to the cloister. Indeed, it is entirely possible that, once we have looked at the concept of( secularism a bit more closely and carefully, we may see the opposition between secular and religious as less mutually exclusive than we sometimes assume.

Indeed, there are two broadly distinct ways of understanding the concept of secularism, only one of which is hostile to religion. There is, on the one hand, a way of understanding the secular idea as an opponent of established belief---including a *non-religious* establishment---and a protector of the rights of free exercise and free association. On the other hand, one can understand the secular ideal as a proponent of *established unbelief* and a protector of strictly individual expressive rights, a category that includes rights of religious expression.

The former view is a fairly minimal, even “negative” understanding of secularism, as a freedom “from” establishmentarian imposition. For it, the idiom of secularism is merely a provisional lingua franca which serves to facilitate communication and commerce among different kinds of belief, rather than some new “absolute” language, an Esperanto of post-religious truth. The latter view, on the other hand, is the more robust, more assertive, more “positive” understanding of secularism ---the one that affirms secularism as an ultimate and alternative faith which rightfully supersedes the tragic blindnesses and destructive irrationalities of the historical religions, at least so far as activity in the public realm is concerned. By understanding religious liberty as a subcategory of individual expressive liberty, it confines religion to a strictly private sphere, where it can do little public harm and little public good.

The first of these two concepts of secularism, which I will call “negative” secularism, sounds almost identical to the language of the First Amendment. This fact in turn suggests that it is at least theoretically possible for there to be such a thing as a non-established secular order, one that is equally respectful of religionists and nonreligionists alike. Such an order preserves a core insistence upon the freedom of the uncoerced individual conscience. But it has a capacious, Jamesian understanding of the religious needs of humanity, and therefore does not presume that the religious impulse should be understood as a merely individual matter---as if religion were nothing more than the private and individual way that each of us speaks to ourselves about “the mystery of human life.” On the contrary it would insist that religion is also a social institution, for whose flourishing the rights of free association---by which we mean the right of co-religionists to form moral communities, which can congregate and include or exclude others from their ranks precisely as they please---are just as important as the rights of individual expression. It insists that pluralism is a necessary concomittant of liberalism, precisely because we are social creatures, whose social existence is a prior condition of all else that we value.

It might also be pointed out that the distinction between “negative” and “positive” understandings of secularism can be found neatly paralleled by competing understandings of the scope and meaning of the secular activity we call “science.” There has been a powerful tendency since the advent of modern science to see its claims as competitive with, and ultimately triumphant over, those of traditional religion. Such a tendency may have been just as bad for science as it was for religion, tending to inflate the claims of science into a reductive “scientism,” replete with the declaration of metaphysical and cosmological certitudes that science, as such, has difficulty sustaining on its own terms. A more modest, “negative” understanding of science sees it as an inherently tentative and provisional form of knowledge, defined by strict adherence to certain procedural norms involving the formulation of hypotheses, and the careful conduct of observable and replicable experiments to test those hypotheses. Such an activity is unable by its very nature to affirm or deny untestable claims about the nature of ultimate reality. To the extent that science appears to presume naturalism or atheism or the like, it may be indeed be required to presume them methodologically---but not ontologically. It is not the business of science, for example, to confirm or deny the possibility of supernatural miracles. Such a carefully limited understanding gives the magnificent achievements of Western science their full measure of respect, without obliging us to construe science as a form of metaphysics, and a sworn enemy of religion.

So is secularism itself a kind of faith, our new established religion? Or is it rightly understood as something very different from religion, something marked not by dogmatism but by provisionality, something cognitively distinct from religion, in just the way that science as a mode of inquiry and understanding is distinct from religion? Is there therefore a way we can enjoy the fruits of secularity without making it into a substitute orthodoxy, a new establishment which has the distinction of being an establishment, not of a religion, but of irreligion?

I think that the answer to that last question is clearly Yes. There can be such an open and Jamesian form of secularity. We all know there can be, because we have seen it done. And it is no less true that, within such an order, there is ample space for a religious core that is animated by a sense, not of dogmatism, but of wonder. We have seen that done too. The more deeply one thinks about it, the more one realizes that under the right circumstances, these two kinds of cores can be, and in fact MUST be, in conversation with one another.

To understand why this is so, we might find some help from the philosopher Charles Taylor’s brilliant and rich, if maddeningly long and disorderly, book *A Secular Age*. The premise of the book, as you know, is that we live in an age in which religious faith has become a choice, and in which the option of unbelief is a live option, even the default option for educated people; and Taylor attempts to explain how that condition has come about, and what its implications are for us today. Taylor is insistent on seeing belief and unbelief in our time as coexisting and interpenetrating phenomena. “Religion remains ineradicably on the horizon of areligion,” he insists, “and vice versa.” Unbelief would be untenable without the moral and metaphysical capital created and banked by the belief it displaced. But religion itself was heavily responsible for the predicament in which it finds itself, by throwing aside the deeper satisfactions of mystery and ritual experienced within corporate worship. Given such misturnings, it was inevitable that we would eventually all find ourselves living inside the same “imminent frame,” the home address of secularism. The chief remaining difference is between those who wish to understand that condition as being final and closed, and those who still contend that it can be open to transcendent experience.

So where does Charles Taylor, a philosopher who is an avowed and observant Catholic and an exceptionally generous, fair-minded man with an extremely wide range of sympathies, stand in all this? It is hard to tell for certain, but his heart seems to be most fully drawn to something that he calls “the Jamesean open space,” a condition of exhilarated ambivalence at the “mid-point of the cross-pressures that define our culture,” the place “where you can feel the winds pulling you now to belief, now to unbelief,” and where you can feel fully the force of both sides of the problem. It conjures in my mind the image of Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting called “The Wanderer Above the Mists,” in which a masterly figure (who looks, from the back, uncannily like Scott Lee) stands on a lofty crag and gazes out at a rocky, forbidding, but sublimely beautiful alpine landscape, enveloped in a thick blanket of fog. Taylor is far too modest to claim to have achieved any like this kind of masterly suspension, but he leaves little doubt that he regards it as a very high and enlightened state, one to which one’s aspirations could be worthily attached.

I am not so sure he is right about that. It does seem to me that one has to make a choice, if one is to ground oneself anywhere at all. Certainly INSTITUTIONS have to choose, and that is the reason why there are multiple cores, secular cores and religious cores, rather than one core for all—one law, as William Blake said, for the lion and the ox, a one law that Blake regarded as “oppression.”

But I also think that some cores, and combinations of cores, may be better than others. Much as I loved that audience in Turkey, and respected its members individually, I could not quite entirely enter into the spirit of their core assumptions, nor they into mine. I am not sure that they could appreciate the following sentiments of William James, taken from his essay called “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,”

And now what is the result of all these considerations and quotations? It is negative in one sense, but positive in another. It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations. It is enough to ask of each of us that he should be faithful to his own opportunities and make the most of his own blessings, without presuming to regulate the rest of the vast field.

There may be for some of you a whiff of relativism in these words, but I do not understand them in that way. The academic enterprise means nothing at all if it is not fundamentally a search for truth, and the search for truth, if it is to mean anything at all, cannot preclude the possibility that the truth *can* be found, and in some cases *has* been found. But it is one thing to say, with the relativist or nihilist, that there is no truth, and quite another to say that the truth cannot be fully known by us. The latter of these is what I take James to be saying here. And that is the same reason why different kinds of institutions need both to be free to organize themselves in distinctive ways, and thereby intensify the special insight that comes of “the peculiar position in which each stands”—but at the same time to be in conversation with one another, and supply in commerce with the other some part of what is missing in their own. That conversation is precisely what we are about during the days of this conference. May the conversation flourish.