

Charles Taylor: *Varieties of Religion Today. William James Revisited*

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In his well-known essay *On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory* (1967), Robert K. Merton gave five reasons for why social scientists keep coming back to the classics in their fields. One of them was “an improbable event: a dialog between dead and living” which, according to Merton, led not only to better internalisation of the cognised, but also, at the same time, contributed to formulating new questions based on the positive interference of ideas between the two authors. This is exactly what Canadian philosopher and sociologist of religion Charles Taylor accomplished when he ‘mediated’ on William James’s more than a century old *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Re-thinking this author’s principal work is all the more relevant because James is undoubtedly, worldwide and otherwise, one of the most popular scholars on religion. It is his phenomenological rather than ‘manipulatively psychological’ grip on religiosity and especially religious experience that even today makes him a highly modern author, an author who has been undoubtedly ‘trendy’ since the beginning of the 20th century (cf. David M. Wulff: *Psychology of Religion*. New York 1997: Willey). All the more surprising then is how rarely James’s work is mentioned in Czech religionist, philosophical and psychological discourse. Our psychologists of religion seem to be too preoccupied with deep psychology theories, de facto reducing a person to a subject of ontogenetically and phylogenetically conditioned intra-psychic processes (cf. most recently Pavel Říčan: *Psychologie náboženství*. (Psychology of Religion). Prague 2002: Portál), while phenomenologists and philosophers, traditionally looking down on psychology for this very reason, are seemingly unable to get over James’s hastily assigned label of psychologist, and actually read him. However, William James preceded

this, today considered unfortunate, particularisation of the humanities and the social sciences, and it is the inter-disciplinary nature of his interests that makes this work still relevant. ‘James revisited’ therefore helps us address some hotly debated issues in philosophy and the sociology of religion.

In the book reviewed here, Charles Taylor has not attempted the impossible task of summing up James’s view on religion (more recent books on this subject to be recommended include Gay W. Allen: *William James*. New York 1967: Viking; Jacques Barzun: *A Stroll with William James*. Chicago 1983; D. Capps and J. L. Jacobs (eds.): *The Struggle for Life*. West Lafayette 1995: SSSR; Johannes Lin-schoten: *Auf dem Wege zu einer phänomenologischen Psychologie*. Berlin 1961: Gruyter). On the contrary, in the first chapter (pp. 3–29) he focuses on some of James’s main points, while hinting at his limitations with regard to our (post-)modern reality. At the same time, he manages to show that while for James individual religious experience, and not institutionally mediated religiosity, was the key, often this individual experience is to a large extent formed by religious groups (pp. 7, 28). Yet we should not forget that Christianity (and other religions) guarantees redemption not only to ‘religious virtuosos’ but to all believers (p. 10). In other words, James’s individualist view of religion, no matter how highly modern it seems, was too narrow; yet it was he, through this limitation of his, who significantly documented the very existential situation of modern society and its interpretation of relations between the individual and supra-individual entities. The limits to James’s conceptualisation of (modern) religiosity are also dealt with in the second chapter, characteristically titled with a key Jamesian term as ‘Twice-Born’ (pp. 33–60). In addition to ‘healthy-minded religion’, or, a happy inner relationship with God, James also emphasised the other possibility for transcendent connection – the continual sense of one’s own inadequacy and sinfulness, resolvable only through a second, spiritual ‘birth’, the prereq-

uisite to redemption. It must be pointed out that James not only heavily favoured this 'pes-simistic' type of religiosity, but also covertly cited some of his own experiences in the book (p. 34). According to Taylor, such religious experiences motivated some other authors, e.g. Max Weber, or more contemporarily Marcel Gauchet (p. 41), to study religion. From the point of view of the sociology of religion, the fact of great significance is that James's widely discussed feeling of personal sinfulness among the followers of these 'sick-soul religions' constitutes one of the main streams that feed the massive spread of Pentecostal evangelicalism (p. 38), which, according to P. L. Berger and other authors, represents an important element of cultural globalisation (cf. Peter L. Berger, ed.: *The Desecularization of the World*. Washington - Grand Rapids 1999: EPPC + Eerdmans, pp. 37-49), while, for instance, in the African-American environment having been replaced by Islam (p. 39). In poetic terms, "James is our great philosopher of the cusp. He tells us more than anyone else about what it's like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you now here, now there. He describes a crucial site of modernity" (p. 59). This leads to what M. Eliade later calls 'fear of history' or, in other words, the search for certainties based on religion (overtly or otherwise).

After some detailed explanation, in the third chapter Taylor gets to the point he wants to make, which is philosophical and sociological analysis of contemporary Euro-American religiosity (pp. 63-107), summing up that, although "more and more people are pushed on to the cusp that James so well described ... [it means] they don't add up the global vindication of James's idea of religious experience that they might be thought to at first blush" (pp. 63-4). Modern secularisation not only leads to the formation of more or less fundamentalist religious denominations (to what Taylor calls 'old-Durkheimism', referring to the classical theory of the social role of religious groups) or limits itself to transferring religiosity of a certain type to the

ethnic, class or state entities (M. Juergensmeyer's 'ethnic religions' or R. N. Bellah's 'civil religion') that he calls 'neo-Durkheimian' (p. 78). Alongside these two types of religiosity the equally important 'post-Durkheimian' modus appears, based on 'expressive' individualism, which in turn has its origins in consumption and its transformations after the Second World War (p. 80). While in a traditional society, where belonging to a religious group and to society as a whole was the same, a person was born into the church (although there were also marginalised heretic groups and tolerated outsiders), and in the modern social structure people either chose their denomination and/or participated in a religiously or implicitly religiously anchored political entity, in our (post)modern world none of this necessarily applies. "The religious life or practice that I become part of not only must be choice, but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this" (p. 94) or, in other words, it does not have to be connected with any social group. According to Taylor, contemporary religiosity cannot be fully described in Durkheimian terms any more, because "the spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society" (p. 102). On the one hand, this privatisation of religion leads to a massive spread of atheism and at the same time to more and more frequent shifts to non-Christian, mainly Oriental religious traditions; on the other hand, it stirs up reaction in the form of fundamental transformations of established churches trying to address this situation, like the Second Vatican Council, representing Catholics, or, for Protestants, a number of Charismatic movements (p. 107).

Taylor's description of the plurality and gradual privatisation of modern Euro-American religiosity (the author correctly realises it is not a global trend, p. 97), and of its fundamental interconnection with the economic and consumer sphere, in many aspects naturally corresponds with the earlier ideas of P. L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. However, it is

in James that Taylor finds basic similarities in the perception of faith. Therefore, at the end of the book, Taylor asks to what extent James's prediction of modern religiosity was justified and, together with this psychologist and philosopher, he tries to go a little deeper than the scientific discourse of the sociology of religion 'allowed' Berger and Luckmann. As a philosopher – or, to use the metaphor I started my review with, as a pair of philosophers in fruitful dialog – he can afford to do so. And that's where Taylor's strength lies. Taylor concludes his thought saying that William James was undoubtedly right that religious experience of a certain type is a key phenomenon of our era, but, together with the above-mentioned sociologists of religion, James wrongly believed in its strict individualisation, though it eventually led to the concept of religious de-privatisation (P. L. Berger: *Desecularization*, pp. 1–18; José Casanova: *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago – London 1994: University of Chicago Press, pp. 211–34). "In a post-Durkheimian world, this allegiance [= piety] will be unhooked from that to a sacralized society (paleo [Durkheimian] style) or some national identity (neo [Durkheimian] style); but it will still be a collective connection" (p. 112). That is exactly why there is de-secularisation going on right now, as many people are finding existential security through various (more or less) unorthodox religious groups; for this very reason, implicit 'neo-Durkheimian' religiosity is still alive, along with its many abused forms (Taylor explicitly mentions the war in Yugoslavia and the BJP in India, p. 115). Finally, it is the very attempt to retain this highly religious experience that leads each one of us, regardless of any 'personal' faith, to religious institutions that enable this (pp. 111–116). According to Taylor, (post)modern religiosity arises in a 'post-Durkheimian', typically Jamesian experience of faith, yet it soon strives to become formally institutionalised, although it is nowhere stated whether and to what extent this institutionalisation must conform to established religious tradition. 'Jesus in Disney-

land' (David Lyon) is one of the many forms of modern faith that are clearly neither completely Christian nor completely inconsistent with Christianity.

In a way, this exquisitely written book, which this review is meant to draw attention to, does not really bring us anything new: many of the important considerations of modern religiosity that Taylor came up with through his 'dialogue' with William James are well-known from the works of modern sociologists of religion. Yet there is another aspect of Taylor's book, which makes it a truly brilliant and inspirational analysis – the book's methodology. Through his encounters with James, the author showed us that a pregnant articulation of key social and scientific problems does not necessarily have to be achieved through strictly scientific analysis but can also be done so using a philosophical speculation of sorts, providing it is able to maintain its relation to science (in this case the sociology of religion). This philosophical-scientific co-operation in widely varied fields is a long-term goal of the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* in Vienna, where Taylor's book originated. Pointing out the possibility of the often very fruitful connection is especially significant in Central and Eastern Europe. The problem is that the Marxist 'scientification' of the social sciences has so torn this connection and devaluated its results that even today it is not considered natural or even possible. That is not to say that in the context of the sociology of religion we should give up the standards of science or that religious experience alone will lead us to religious studies; rather it is to point out the fundamental mutual benefits of both the scientific and the philosophical-theological approach to religiosity if both sides take each other seriously enough and at the same time are aware of the limits of either approach. Taylor's book *Varieties of Religion Today* is a perfect example of the plausibility of such a synthesis.

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