The Myth of the Primacy of Religious Experience
Towards a Restoration of the Moral Dimension

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Belief in the primacy of religious experience has all the marks of a modern myth, floating free of time and history like an eternal verity that needs only to be applied to be proved true. The fact that it is an idea with its own history and its own specific and often unspoken assumptions somehow seems to contradict the whole import of the idea. For if there is open to the human individual a realm of direct contact with things and events of ultimate value that skips over the intervening variables of language and culture and beliefs about the world, then this contact must yield “fact” that precedes reflection and is impervious to public criticism. For this reason, it is not only self-evident to the experiencer but serves to criticize reflected, once-removed, mediate pictures and ideas about religious things and events. Such pure experience is the guarantee that religious structures and theories must always answer to an unfailingly present and real foundation. In short, the claim that religious experience is primary means that it is a privately felt, authoritative, nonrational contact with something out of the ordinary. Whether it takes the common form, “I speak to God” or the rarer form, “God speaks to me,” is secondary. Moreover, its primacy does not exert itself in the first place against the content of received doctrine but against the content of ordinary habits of thinking and experiences of life. For the actual subject of the reli-
gious experience, the concern with its content as negating or enhancing received doctrine arises only when the individual makes an attempt to return the experience to a public realm with a specific doctrinal tradition.

It is this idea of the primacy of religious experience—not the primacy of the content of the experience, but the idea that whatever the content, such experiences are primary—that seems to me to have taken on the force of myth in our century. Like all myths, it works strongest where it is believed to be exempt from historical conditions. But to see the idea at work among us as a stage in its career does not as such, I believe, diminish its importance, only its self-evidence. To speak of belief in the primacy of religious experience over doctrine and institution as myth does raise suspicion of self-deception in those who subscribe to it, but it also alerts us to the possibility that we are dealing with something of greater consequence than ordinary conventional thinking, religious or otherwise.

The story of how that idea took shape through time and came to take on mythical dimensions is well beyond the scope of a short essay. At least as far as Western intellectual history is concerned, the first time that all the ingredients of the idea appear clearly is in the Gnostic and Hermetic traditions of the first centuries of our era. There we find the primacy of experience or gnosis argued in a context of demythifying the Judeo-Christian story of creation and the social institutions based on it. The elaborate cosmology set up to replace the ruling myth was not at its most profound level merely an alternative doctrine but an attempt to disestablish religious truth and restore direct contact between the individual believer and the corporate tradition. The idea played an important role for succeeding centuries in the esoteric and mystical traditions of Judaism and Christianity, but only came again to full flower in the Enlightenment where the conflict between belief in established dogma and the search for religious played itself out freely in phi-
The Myth of the Primacy of Religious Experience — 27 —

losophy and the arts. The next major turning point in the idea came in the aftermath of the birth of the new human sciences in the nineteenth century. As sociology, psychology, anthropology, and religious studies, each in its own way chiseled away at the absolute claims of revealed truth, movements sprung up everywhere claiming to restore contact with the transcendent through direct personal experience. This in turn stimulated the search for similar traditions in the religions of the East, where the idea of the primacy of experience had a still longer and more illustrious career. Today the idea is found among religious people across the world and has come to be seen as a kind of universal "archetype" of religious history. This, too, is part of the history of the idea and part of its mythical appeal today.

For the present paper, I shall content myself with stating the need for such a history in order to turn my attention to what I perceive as an unhappy consequence of the idea in our century: the way in which the overvaluing of the dichotomy between experience and doctrine leads to an undervaluing of the practical, moral consequences that are the final justification for both. I do so by contrasting the defense and use of the idea by two of its most important patrons, the psychologists William James and Carl Gustav Jung. I begin with a brief word about the specific context that makes the contrast possible and significant.

Despite the complaints of mainline Christian churches about the growing ignorance of basic doctrine among their adherents, there is more religious teaching circulating throughout the world, especially throughout traditionally Christian lands, than ever before. There is an unprecedented proliferation of new religious movements in the wake of technological advancement, each with its own view of the universal order of things. The Western missionary
movements in the nineteenth-century aimed at converting the
world may have failed to win the world to Christianity, but they
have succeeded at converting other religions to its missionary
vision. The distinction between proselytizing “homelands” and
proselytized “fields” is a relic of another age. The world missionary
markets are open.

It is in this criss-cross of missionary competition and doctrinal
saturation that access to direct religious experience has become
more appealing than ever for growing numbers of people. For a
small minority, trust in direct experience is a way to silence the din
of rival doctrines entirely. For others, it is a way to detour the doc­
trinal debates in order to confirm their choice of sectarian teach­
ing. For still others, it is a way to silt through the *embarrass de riches*
for a few precious stones of religious wisdom, wherever they are to
be found. For those traditional world religions that have fallen on
hard times with organizational crisis and dwindling membership,
such growing reliance on personal experience is a blight of unex­
pected proportions. For those disenchanted with the religion of
their youth or born into this world without education in a particu­
lar creed but seeking a religious outlook on life, watching the care­
fully cultivated fields of the established religions go to seed only
reconfirms their confidence in the fertility of the native soil.

Nor is this phenomenon restricted to the technological
advanced countries of the United States and Western Europe,
where considerable sociological research has been done. Even in
countries like Japan, where surveys have consistently demonstrated
a widespread belief in the primacy of religious sentiment and ritu­
al and a relative disinteredness in received doctrine, a younger gen­
eration is appearing which has more aggressively faces the need to
articulate beliefs more in line with experience. The doctrinal flurry
is especially interesting in Japan, and has been more successful
than either Buddhism or Christianity at reviving interest in reli­
gious teachings as a whole.
Be that as it may, belief in the primacy of religious experience over doctrine or institution seems to me one of the fastest spreading religious myths of our times, at least faster than any single traditional established religion. It cuts across the lines of traditional religion and is found across the spectrum from fundamentalism to free thought. As a belief, it is in some measure within the reach of individual choice, but as a myth it has roots deep in history and belongs to part of the general atmosphere of the culture within which it circulates.

In the classical Christian lands of Europe and the Americas, where surface doctrines have battened well on currents underground, the pledge of allegiance to one's own experience amounts to an experiment to ignore the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric. It is different in cultures of the East, where the counterpositioning of doctrinal traditions is not as marked in the popular imagination, and the turn to experience is less likely to provoke serious conflict with doctrine than it is a simple refusal to engage in reflection on doctrine at all. Christianity in the East is an exception. Here the shift of emphasis is upsetting in the extreme because it removes the protective veil of doctrine and provokes an inculturation that has long been considered dangerous to affiliation with a worldwide Church. In any case, what I wish to argue here is that the consequences of the participation in the myth of the primacy of religious experience are neither simply private nor simply a matter of historical process, and that the historicity of the idea is only appropriated when those wider but immediate consequences are faced up to.

In 1899, when he was preparing the lectures that would eventually become *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote to his friend Frances Morse outlining the problem he had set himself:
First, to defend (against all the prejudices of my class) “experience” against “philosophy” as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life—I mean prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world’s meaning; and second, to make the hearer or reader believe, what I invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind’s most important function. A task well-nigh impossible, I fear, and in which I shall fail, but to attempt it is my religious act. 3

James stuck to his intentions. His lectures showed perhaps for the first time in the science of religion, but at least at just the right time, the scope and eloquence of private religious experience without which the nobility of religious doctrine remains forever incomplete and the reasons for its survival unintelligible.

The “class” against whose prejudices he was struggling in setting himself such a project was the New England Christian intellectual establishment, for whom the institutional and academic respectability of doctrine weighed supreme in matters secular and religious. It was the period after the civil war, a time both of reconstruction and of an influx of foreigners into the country that chafed sorely on the American’s traditional sense of identity. Social Darwinism shifted the attentions of intellectuals away from the supremacy of the individual and on to the clash of races and cultures. The invasion of the railroads into the wheatfields and pastures advanced under the banner of the manifest destiny of technology. Against this there arose revival campaigns that spoke for the individual worker and railed against the way in which religion was being used to prey on the weak.

The response of religion was as varied and confused as the intellectual ferment. Social Gospel movements took up the challenge on the collective terms in which they were posed. Revivalist movements of every stamp, from the aggressively fundamentalistic to the
radically heretical spoke of return to the land, to simple life, and to personal religious transformation. Not only did biblical literalists and creationists rally religious fervor against the rising new order, but a host of new religions, cults, the so-called New Thought Alliance, therapeutic movements, theosophy, hypnotism, animal magnetism, and various forms of occult practice transfigured the religious landscape from coast to coast.  

In any case, it was not as if James's "class" had fallen into a state of apathy or nonchalance from which they needed to be awakened. Quite the opposite, their interests were keen, only misguided. For it was judgment of the correctness or incorrectness of the teachings of these movements, religious and secular, that in their case overshadowed attention to what was being privately felt. This James rejected.

Philosopher that he was, James did not fight these prejudices on their own terms, but began with the accounts and descriptions of the object of the prejudices. Nor did he restrict himself to the religious phenomena that were apparent in America and the European continent at the time. He drew the confrontation between experience and doctrine into a larger sphere, drawing his own age and its prejudices in a greater context. Throughout the better part of this century, not only has James' method survived the prejudices of his class, but the echoes of his appeal to the primacy of experience have spread far and wide throughout the world of religious studies. If much of his prose reads as fresh and inspiring as when he first put pen to paper, it is in part because the question he posed himself is both very old and a very real and stubborn part of modern modes of thought. But it is also because he resisted all clean dichotomies between experience, dogma, practice, and institutional affiliation.

The wording of his letter leaves the impression that James would leave aside all question of which religious doctrines are true and which not. Even if they were all absurd—and the implication is that
this is in some sense the case—the experiences privately felt are enough to sustain the important functions of religion in human society. In fact, James did not leave it unquestioned. Part of the reason is no doubt that he understood well the folly of fighting one prejudice with another. Had James framed the conflict between the two views of religion as a war of emancipation for true religion against tyranny of creeds and theological speculation, his crowning commitment to the "life of it as a whole" would have been the first victim. Another part is the fact that he considered wrestling with the whole issue of religious experience to be itself a religious act. This is no doubt part of the enduring charm of James' work. On this score, alas, James is rarely quoted and even less rarely imitated. Somehow this is falsely associated with sentimentalism or a clouding of perspective. He himself confessed at the end of his lectures that on re-reading his manuscript, he was "almost appalled at the amount of emotionality which I find in it."5 But when he takes that as an apology for being "drier and less sympathetic" in his conclusion, what he gives us is a testimony of individual belief as moving as those of those he has cited. Clearly there was no question of religiosity being associated with mere emotionality. When we consider how animated appeals to the primacy of experience over doctrine that lack the element of the religious act more often inflame the native wound of organized religion than they dress it, we can only appreciate the importance of saintliness in the scholar.

The Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung, whose work was preoccupied with religion more than any other theme, wrote in his declining years:

One half of humanity battens and grows strong on a doctrine fabricated by human ratiocination; the other half sickens from the lack of a myth commensurate with the situation. The Christian nations
have come to a sorry pass; their Christianity slumbers and has neglected to develop its myth further in the course of the centuries.⁹

Jung classed himself among those who did not believe in the doctrine, but who trusted in the inner experience that alone could breathe new life into the doctrine by opening the individual to a collective realm.

This foundational assumption is clear in the words with which he ended his 1937 Yale lectures on *Psychology and Religion*:

Religious experience is absolute; it cannot be disputed. You can only say that you have never had such an experience, whereupon your opponent will reply: “Sorry, I have.” And there your discussion will come to an end.”... No one can know what the ultimate things are. We must therefore take them as we experience them. And if such experience helps to make life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: “This was the grace of God... Only heedless fools will wish to destroy this; the lover of the soul, never.

Jung saw dogma as the cornerstone of organized religion and his insistence on the primacy of religious experience had no choice but to challenge the centrality of institutionalized dogma head-on. Accordingly, the camp of “heedless fools” of whom he speaks here therefore includes far more than those modern skeptics who reject religion out of hand. At their center stand the theological keepers of doctrine whom he accuses of having forgotten that religious doctrines are finally no more than “codified and dogmatized forms of original religious experience.”⁷

Of course, the cause-and-effect relationship that Jung set up between original religious experience and collectively believed doctrine is not quite so simple as Jung’s summary account would lead one to suppose. It requires a giant leap over a tangled historical process, over the entire field of intervening conditions and variables that religious studies has busied itself with for the better
part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Jung takes the step in stride again and again on the grounds that his first and last concern is to help the individual patient whose imaginative life throws up images counter to common belief. From there it is but a short step to conclude that this was how all religious doctrine began, and that therefore there is good reason to encourage one to trust in the corrective function of the psyche vis-à-vis common faith. He goes so far as to claim that

it is the function of the Church to oppose all original experience, because this can only be unorthodox. The only movement inside our civilization which has, or should have, some understanding of these endeavors is psychotherapy.  

This position is further bolstered by giving equal attention to the esoteric tradition in which the deliverances of modern religious experience often find kindred imagery and modes of thought. History of religions aside, Jung’s trust in religious products of the psyche sound rather surprising coming from a master at the psychoanalytic enterprise, which depends on not accepting things at face value, of seeking out the double-entendre in things. Where better, one would wonder, than in the world of religious experience to trip over one’s own biases and complexes and land oneself in fanciful beliefs that cloak unquestioned problems and forgotten memories! Indeed, Jung’s own work is full of examples of this very thing. To say this in no way diminishes the importance of his observation that firsthand religious experiences do often enhance the quality of the individual life, perhaps with a regularity unparalleled in any other domain of human life. Nor does it refute the possibility of rather stable, even archetypal patterns in religious experience. What it does do is challenge the “absoluteness,” purity,” and “immediacy” of the contents of the experience and make clear the need for some standpoint outside of the experiencer with which to judge private perceptions of a religious nature. Insofar as it is only a matter of private experiences brightening up private lives, one is
hard pressed not to side with Jung against those who would “liberate” people from such a treasure. But if these experiences are spoken of as they invariably are, and if that speech finds its way into the wider fabric of language and asserts its authority over received dogma, as Jung felt it should, then the treasure has taken on grander value and left the sphere in which personal peace of mind can serve as judge and jury for what is true and right.

Within the Christian West, where theological science had grown to an inflated sense of self-importance, perhaps only an experiment as radical as Jung’s was able to draw attention to the heedless folly of doctrinal hardheadedness. What is clear is that he drew the line between dogma and experience as sharply as anyone in modern times, and had very little sense of how historically conditioned his arguments were. The accumulated authority of antidoctrinal religious experiences was for Jung a phenomenon of wider, almost universal significance for Christianity as a whole, and from there for all religion. This gave a flavor to his prose distinct from James: James had concentrated on what he called the “giants” of religious experience in order to help commonplace felt experience stand up proudly on their own, against all our philosophies, as the true backbone of religion. He let the varieties of religious experience speak on their own against the prejudices of his class. When Jung was writing about matters of religion, the Christian theologian was always sitting in the corner, bible in his lap, with a stern face and a scowl. When he chose examples of religious experience from history, he did so with an eye to challenging the theologian’s self-image. Even when he dealt with religions other than Christianity, and often took up the cause on behalf of those who had no quarrel with orthodoxy, he constantly reminds us of the theological specter in the corner. Whereas James tried to move the struggled with those of his “class” out into the broader, more rational intellectual history of the West, Jung battled with the ghost of theology, a minority figure that he had imagined to be the rule.
There is no reason not to agree with Jung that doctrines and creeds can channel or even suppress religious experience. James himself had said as much and even advised him to “bid a definitive good-bye to dogmatic theology” insofar as it does not presuppose immediate experiences as its subject matter. “I do believe,” he writes, “that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophical and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” But he also realized that they protect the framework that makes religious experience possible in the first place. The philosophic and theological climate of our time “inevitably foreshadows its own clothing on us.” Myths, superstitions, dogmas, creeds, metaphysical theologies, and critique of one against the other provide the idiom for expressing belief about what it is that has happened to one, and in this way draw the experiencer back into a wider world where the isolated event can be given sense. There can no more be a fresh experience of a religious fact without a given language of symbolorum fidei than there can be a branch without a tree. Notwithstanding his doctrine of quasi-Kantian universal “archetypal” dispositions to certain religious forms of expression, Jung too would realize that visions of the Blessed Mother holding the Christ child in her arms do not come to those unacquainted with the Christian story any more than the Kannon appears to medieval nuns in their cloister.

The question of doctrine remains, then, but a bit clearer: James and Jung agreed that one person’s religious experiences are authoritative for the one who has them but cannot be so for another. They also agreed that they break down the authority of the rationalist consciousness which abstracts to doctrines passed on from one age to the next. The difference comes with how they decided on whether or not the spoken deliverances of the experiencer are “true.” Both agreed that the kind of spiritual guidance and further instruction in dogma that aims at correcting the memory of an
experience to bring it in line is an affront to the experience. But there the similarity fairly well comes to a halt.

Jung's stated aim was to help the individual patient. "Nothing has happened if one is not cured." This only raises the question back to the level of what constitutes a cure, and here Jung is shaky. Not to go into the details, suffice it to say that the measure of the "cure" rests on the individual's sentiment of satisfaction. Thus the question has been begged, not answered.

But in fact, Jung functioned differently. He offered a spiritual guidance that tried to broaden the native environment of experiences to include the whole of religious tradition, doctrinal and antidoctrinal. The truth of the statements of the religious experiences were confirmed by impartially located parallels and comparisons. We leave aside how well Jung wielded the tools of his trade, except to register the suspicion that he saw his work as an *ars* as much as a *scientia*, and therefore had to answer not only to the scholars whose fields he was trespassing on but also to the patient sitting before him. (In this regard, he would probably have resisted James' implication—citing Cardinal Newman—that this is in fact what high theological reason has always aimed at, even though the objective results in organized religion are generally the very opposite.)

To put it in a nutshell, Jung saw his patients' deliverances to be true in proportion as they were collective rather than private, centered rather than pluriform, harmonious rather than divisive. In applying this measure of the true, the distinction between the psyche, the images it produces, and the language with which these are spoken of becomes rather bleary. Perhaps more significant is the fact that this approach to truth virtually ignored the question of what was morally acceptable and what was not.

From his earlier correspondence with Freud we find Jung lamenting the association of religion with morality, an association he found strong in the theological environment of the time.
Throughout his works one looks in vain for any kind of distinctions between conventional morality, theological morality, and any other kind of ethics. Moral codes were simply the practical side of dogma—perhaps of some prophylatic aid to the unreflective or the young, but unsuited to one who would open to the full depth of the psyche. His standard of morals, as of truth remained the private appropriation of corporate patterns. It is here that we see the telling difference between him and James.

Jung's endpoint is James' starting point. Like Jung he saw that the question of the truth of the content of religious experiences was not answerable in literal terms. "In all sad sincerity," he wrote, "I think we must conclude that the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless." 14 James admitted that the objective study of religion was a better way to compare creeds than mere trafficking in denunciations and anathemas of the past. And he even hoped that his work would somehow add a "crumb-like contribution" to the emerging "science of religion." 15 But his psychological insight made him see that if religious truth is no more a purely private affair than self-deception is, and if the danger of confusing truth with self-deception is present in religion, then that danger is of concern wider than merely that of the direct experiencer. To the end he maintained a healthy doubt about the immediacy and absoluteness of private religious experience and its pure detachment from received doctrine, and in that way came to question the terms of the dichotomy differently from Jung.

Jung saw all psychic facts as a kind of truth, but in the concrete identified truth and fact only in the case of archetypal phenomena. Thus appealing to the fundamental scientific principle that when facts to not agree with the theory it is the theory that has to be reformed, he concludes that when received doctrine does not agree with the contents (truth) of religious experience, it is the experience that is primary. If one wishes to take seriously religious
experience, which transcends the boundaries of the rational, its contents must not be dragged back down to the realm of the rational (or "metaphysical," as Jung often said), and therefore there is no choice but to trust in the universal dimension of the psyche. As humans we cannot know if the purest working of the psyche brings us into contact with reality, but if we do not believe this is possible the idea of truth becomes meaningless.

James, who understood the nature of rationality and its limits clearer than Jung, was able to criticize it more effectively. Where Jung flays his arms about wildly and yet never extricates himself from the rationalist agenda, James cuts with precision and brings us face to face with a momentous awakening about the nature of religious doctrine.

James' solution is as simple as it is radical, and he lays it out at the succinctly start of his lecture 14 "The Value of Saintliness." In renouncing fixed, theological definitions of the human and the divine, and letting experience have its day, and yet appreciative of what religion has done to contribute to what is best and noblest in human history, James finds only one solution possible:

We cannot distinguish natural from supernatural effects; nor among the latter now which are favors of God, and which are counterfeit operations of the demon. We have merely to collect things together without any special a priori theological system, and out of an aggregate of piecemeal judgment as to the value of this and that experience—judgment in which our general philosophic prejudices, our instincts, and our common sense are our only guides—decide that on the whole one type of religion is approved by its fruits, and another type condemned.16

James is saying more than simply that no religion has ever succeeded merely because of the apodeictic certainty of its teachings. As the history of religion progresses, in place of doctrines that could not support changing values of civilization—like the gods that demand suicide or human sacrifice—opposing beliefs arise to
take their place as "true." Few people, even few scholars of religion, will remember the doctrines of Jonestown a decade ago or those of the Davidians of last year, any more than hardly anyone feels the needs to be acquainted with the doctrines of contemporary cults like the Oomu Shinri-kyou and the Moonies in order to pass judgment on their "truth." And when Catholic priests and Zen monks, the trusted spiritual leaders, get caught in sexual escapades that abuse their religious authority, the holders of those traditions have to fight mightily against the spontaneous reaction to reject their teaching because of their practice.

Now what the introduction of the moral ingredient does in the first place is shift the search away from a set of transcendent principles or inspired statements to a set of useful—and in many cases very familiar—virtues against which religion can be measured. In other words, it breaks down the dichotomy between doctrine and experience by introducing a third element—namely, praxis. Despite the conventions of theological science, this is all very much in line with the most obvious teaching of Jesus about "by their fruits you shall know them."  

Of course, if this were all there were to reconciling experience with doctrine, then only good people would qualify to discuss theology and metaphysics, which is patently not the case. It might also mean that only good people have genuine religious experiences, which is also not the case, as both James and Jung knew. A model of the search for a truth that is, as James said "on the whole" confirmed through virtue teaches us the provisional nature of the instruments with which we navigate our way to the ultimate truths of life—our "philosophical prejudices"—and the need for healthy doubt about our native "instinct." But it does not take their place entirely. The fact that so many have taken refuge in Jung’s critique of religious rationalism and his proposed therapeutic measure of religious truth is more than a case of mere mass self-deception.
Perhaps the only way that religious ideas that conform to our best philosophical efforts and trust in our deepest sentiments about our human nature, and in that sense the only way that such ideas can possibly mean anything at all, is if one experiments with their truth. The story of religious truth, to borrow the subtitle of Ghandi’s *Autobiography*, must always be a “story of experiments with truth.”

To introduce this element of the experimental into a discussion of religious truth also introduces the possibility of continual change and critical reformation. When we refer back to our “inexperience” as children we mean that our unquestioning, simple, direct experiential contact with the world around us blinded us to the assumptions we took in, like breathing the air, from the environment around us. Only the failed experiment of trying to use these assumption in the complexities of adult life lead us to abandon them.

But there is another, second reason for introducing the moral element into dislodging the primacy of experience, one that brings us beyond the realm of personal history and into social history. For the problem is not ultimately with the primacy of experience over doctrine, but with experience over morality, which seems to follow as a consequence. For if it is primary, then it not only grounds ethics but privatizes it ultimately. This means that individualism is fostered and with it the social system in which the rights are concentrated in the hands of those with access to the system of justice has no cause to fear the critique of religion. This is what I find morally unacceptable, not any particular individual moral decisions that are taken. Collective individualism feeds off of this anaesthetizing of the moral sense by making it answer to religious experience and not the other way around.

This does not negate the fact that to mark off a sacred space around certain experiences is not only our right, it is part of the business of giving meaning to life. But to go the step further and
make this space transcendent, to exempt it from its specific frame of reference in time and place and language, is to abuse the gift of rationality. What interests me is why this takes place, and what remedy there is, short of pure hardheadedness, for saving the sacredness of experiences we choose to treasure. The awareness of the historical specificity of our belief in the primacy of experience does not merely land us in skepticism; it reminds us that without the restoration of the moral dimension our noblest and highest experiences and ideas are at best mere appendages to the story of mankind’s religious quest, never their true backbone; and at worst the playthings of the tribalistic moral tyrannies of an age.

If I have any common complaint against Jung’s and James’s arguments as I have laid them out above, it has to do with the absence of the aesthetic element. The question of religious truth is not exhausted by the interplay between experience, doctrine, and praxis. Should not simply work its effect on doctrine but should serve to purify experience itself, cleanse the senses, make them more alert. And to the degree that experience and doctrine do not do so, their truth should come into question. But this is a question I have dealt with elsewhere and so shall stay my pen here.18

Part of the reason for believing in the primacy of experience that is pure, immediate, and unreflected is that it seems to answer the need for salvation from the clouded perceptions that haunt us on all sides. The reasons why we cannot perceive the world clearly lie not only in our physical apparatus but also in the changing language and customs, the epoch-specific ideas that shape societies and relationships. Whatever our progress in civilization, the stubborn fact of the clouding remains constant, and with it the cry for deliverance from it. As Nietzsche suggested, the desire of science and philosophy for an “immaculate perception” of facts does not
differ fundamentally from the desire for a religious experience of truth that transcends this ever-changing world. Both hold out the promise of liberation from the ineluctable predicament of a capacity for reason whose limits are ultimately hidden from reason itself. Like the fly buzzing helplessly in front of my window pane as I write these lines, it may well be that in the end we cannot get where we desperately need to go precisely because the barriers that block our way are simply too transparent for us to notice. In the end, all our understanding, even against what seems the clear-bluest sky of the most immediate experience, remains within a cloud of unknowing.

If, as James said and Jung would have agreed, religion, for all its absurdities, is still “mankind’s most important function,” there can be little truth to its greatness if it does not include the appropriation of this fundamental fact.

Shortly after completing a lengthy treatise on “Transformation Symbolism in the Mass,” Jung was asked in a public lecture if he himself still attended public Mass. “I cannot,” he replied. “I know too much.” Some twenty years later when asked if he believed in God, Jung replied, “I do not believe. I know.” Had someone asked William James, who was reconciled to the fact that he was temperamentally unsuited to mystical experience, why he stopped off each morning in the Harvard chapel on his way to work, I imagine he would have replied, “I must. I know too little.” One need only replace the verb know with experience to appreciate that each of them was honoring a common belief in the primacy of religious experience, however differently they chose to appropriate it.

NOTES

* This essay is a translation of 『神话としての宗教的体験の優先—その倫理的次元の復興へ向かって』 which appeared originally in 『体験と言葉—その根拠と倫理性を求めて』 ed. by Kaji Tetsuro, Fukui Kazuteru, Mori Tetsuro (Tokyo: Dainyōdō, 1995), 119–40.

1 An impressive series of studies has been made on the loss of orthodoxy and religiosity (“secularization”) in these countries, first in 1981 and again in
1991. The latest results of these are analyzed in Pieter Ester, Loek Halman, and Ruud de Moor in *The Individualizing Society: Value Change in Europe and North America*. These studies have disproved the hypothesis that economic progress was the major factor in the ongoing individualization of religion, or that they have led to a convergence of doctrinal values across cultural lines. These do not, however, amount to a study of what I am calling the “myth of religious experience.” To the best of my knowledge, no extensive statistics on this are available.

2 A recent survey of religious attitudes among the university students (4,366 questionnaires, 4005 or 92% respondents) prepared by the Kokugakuin Daigaku Nihonbunka Kenkyūjo, under the direction of Inoue Nobutaka shows that 38% are interested in religion and 44 are not. Of those interested, large the largest percentages were those not belonging to any religion but interested in religious experience (69%) or in religion in general (36%). The questions did not ask clearly about doctrine, however, and this impression of mine has yet to find statistical backing.


4 In many ways, the religious events in Japan after the war bear comparison with the post-civil-war period in the United States. Such study would shift the questions away from the current deadlock over apparently irreconcilable patterns of belief about ethnic identity, universal rights, institutional structure, and the function of doctrine and experience which continue to dominate comparisons between the religious consciousness of the two countries.


9 *Varieties*, 439, 422–3.

10 *Varieties*, 414.

11 *Collected Works* 14:105–.


13 See also *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (London: Kegan Paul, 1917), 85.

14 *Varieties*, 445.

15 *Varieties*, 424.
In this regard, we note that James’ basic argument comes to us intact today in the liberation theology, born in Latin America in the 1960’s. “The Truth shall make you free” means “What frees you, that is the Truth.” And if falsehood enslaves, then “truth” that enslaves, even be it religious doctrine, is not true. It is a standpoint at which the face-off between experience and doctrine is harmonized.

I have argued this in the context of early attempts at Christianizing gnosticism in "The Recovery of the Senses: Against the Asceticisms of the Age." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33/2 (Spring 1996): 216-37.

See “I Believe in God,” *Daily Mail* 29 April 1955, 6. The comment on the mass appears in *Collected Works* 18:276.