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Among the standard challenges to claims for the reasonableness of religious belief and, in particular, of belief in a Transcendent, is the argument that religious experience is ineffable, that attempts to describe the object of this experience (e.g., the Transcendent) are either question begging or fail, and that it is therefore not reasonable to believe anything about the Transcendent.

An illustration of this view of the transcendent is provided by William James, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). There, James cites a passage from William Hale White, the 19th century author of *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance*:

> God reminds us... that man is not the measure of His creation. The world is immense, constructed on no plan or theory which the intellect of man can grasp. It is *transcendent* everywhere... What more have we to say now than God said from the whirlwind over two thousand five hundred years ago?[1]

Yet James clearly thought that one could say something about the Transcendent, and that it was at least not unreasonable to believe in it. One may well ask, then, what is James' view of the challenges proposed by the putative ineffability of the Transcendent, and by White's remark?

James was an unusual figure. He is recognized as one of the

[1]Cited in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [*The Works of William James*, Vol. 15] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 69.

founders of American pragmatism but also of the modern science of psychology. He was trained as a medical doctor, though he never practiced. He was familiar with an array of philosophical traditions, and was also an intimate of many of the literary figures of his time (particularly through his brother, the novelist Henry James). He was a self-declared 'radical empiricist,' though he had been sympathetic to idealism at the beginning of his academic career.[2] And while James was not an especially devout man, he nevertheless had a strong interest in religion, and was the author of a number of essays and books on the topic.[3] Indeed, despite his professed empiricism and pragmatism, James is known for his defense of a 'right to believe,' even where there is insufficient evidence.

James' discussion of religious belief and religious experience provides a response to White's view concerning the Transcendent — and, more generally, defends the view that one has a 'right to believe' in the 'Transcendent.' Although James adopts an empiricist and pragmatist approach to the phenomena of religion, he is sympathetic to claims concerning religious experience, such as accounts of a Transcendent, and defends a 'right to believe' even where evidence and descriptive accounts fall short. Indeed, James maintains that religious experience — including putative encounters with the Transcendent — can be discussed intelligibly, and that it can be an appropriate ground for religious belief.

In what follows, I propose to assess the plausibility of James' views. I begin with a short statement of the context in which James' arguments arise — i.e., that of the evidentialist challenge to religious belief provided by the 19th century mathematician and philosopher, William Clifford (1845-79). Next, I examine what I argue are three distinct stages in James' response: first, his critique of evidentialism; second, his (lesser-known) positive argument for the reasonableness of

[2]See, for example, his early essays "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind*, vol. 4 (1879), pp. 317-346; see also "Rationality, Activity and Faith," *Princeton Review*, vol. 2 (1882), pp. 58-86; these were later included in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897).

[3]For example, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), his 1901-02 Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909). There are elements that bear on grounds for religious belief in his *Pragmatism* (1907).

religious belief based on his account of religious or mystical experience; and third, his articulation of a pragmatist theory of justification which provides a general structure for determining the reasonableness of a belief and of believing. I then draw out some of the implications of James' views for religious belief including concerning its relation to evidence and the right to believe. Finally, I review the advantages, but also the weaknesses, of James' arguments concerning the meaning, truth, and reasonableness of claims of religious belief, and their bearing on a belief in a Transcendent.

1. Context

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[4] This is the credo of what is called "evidentialism." It sets a standard for one's epistemic and moral responsibilities in believing, independently of the truth of what is offered to belief, and it is the 'maxim' of William Clifford's approach to the question of when one has a 'right to believe.' It is a statement that, at first glance, may seem to reasonable people to be almost a truism. When we reflect on how to put it into practice, however, we see that it is not only a powerful, but also a corrosive, claim. And when we apply this maxim to religion, believers may rightly become unsettled, for it seems clear that many — perhaps most — of the things that they believe are things for which they have little or no evidence and, hence, for which they have *no right* to believe.

How can one reply to Clifford's maxim and its consequences? Are we, as reasonable individuals, forced to accept them, and adjust our beliefs accordingly? One — and, indeed, the classic — response to Clifford came from James.

Like Clifford, James considered himself an empiricist. Though there are significant differences in what their respective empiricisms

[4]William Kingdon Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in his *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1886), p. 346.

involved[5], like Clifford, James held that the standard theistic arguments were insufficient and inadequate.[6] Nevertheless, for James, the evidentialist standard of Clifford was unacceptable for at least some matters of belief and, in response, he sought to defend "our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced."[7] Indeed, James suggests that it is not only permitted, morally and epistemically, but reasonable to hold certain religious beliefs, even though we cannot provide "sufficient evidence" or a conclusive argument for them, and even though such beliefs may not be known to be true.

James' response to Clifford is to be found, in large part, in his 1896 lecture, "The Will to Believe" — and it is here that one finds James' account of belief and some of his criteria for reasonability. In the first section that follows, then, I focus on these issues. But there is more to James' view of belief than what we find in "The Will to Believe." There are additional reasons why James would reject Clifford's view and why one may have a right to adopt a believing attitude — and these can be found in his comments on religious experience and on argument and proof in his later writings. I detail these in the second and third sections, below.

2. James' Response

2.1 The Critique of Evidentialism

James begins "The Will to Believe" with a clarification of terms, and keeping them clear is essential to following his argument.

The first term that James defines is "hypothesis," by which he means "anything that may be proposed to our belief."[8] Now, any hypothesis,

[5]James sees his empiricism as drawing on a broader and richer account of experience than that of classical empiricists, such as Hume and Clifford, though like them he would insist that "beliefs verified concretely by somebody are the posts of the whole superstructure". See his *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways Of Thinking - Popular Lectures On Philosophy* [*The Works of William James*, Vol. 1] Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 100.

[6]See *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lect. 18.

[7]*The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* [*The Works of William James*, Vol. 6] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 13.

[8]*Ibid.*

James writes, is either 'live' or 'dead.' By *live*, James means a hypothesis "which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed" — i.e., it makes an "electric connection with [one's] nature."[9] A live hypothesis, then, is the sort of thing that one might worry about; how 'live' it is, is determined by a person's willingness to act on it and, so, its 'liveliness' is relative to the individual. But a hypothesis being live or dead does not depend on whether it is true; generally, the only thing that counts is whether it is *worthy* of being believed, so that one might be inclined to act on it. For many of us, then, hypotheses such as: 'There will be a major ecological crisis in 50 years' and 'There will be no social welfare programs in 20 years' are live ones, but clearly they are not live for all people (say, in the first case, for the very old and, in the second, for the very young). Live hypotheses are contrasted with those that are *dead*. Hypotheses such as: 'The world was created in 4004 BCE' or 'Lord Rama is the incarnation of Vishnu' or 'The number of grains of sand on the beach at Durban, South Africa, is greater than the number of grains of sand on the beach at Yanliao Seaside Park in Taiwan' are likely dead hypotheses for most of us, but they may not be so for all.

A second term that James defines is "option," by which he means simply "the decision between two hypotheses."[10] There are options of different kinds: living or dead; forced or avoidable; and momentous or trivial. A 'living option' is one where both hypotheses are live ones — for example, a student who has been accepted into law school and into graduate school may be confronted with the option: 'Either go to study law or go to graduate school.' A 'forced option' is one where a person *must* act on one or the other of the alternative hypotheses: for example, "Speak now or forever hold your peace" (said during a wedding service) or (as in the colloquial expression) "Fish or cut bait." (Here, making a choice cannot normally be delayed. By putting off the decision, one has effectively made a decision — i.e., has said "No.") A 'momentous option' occurs where the opportunity is unique, what is at stake is significant, and where one's decision is irreversible.[11] James gives the example of the option of participating in an expedition; we might think of the opportunity to take part in the first expedition

[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

to Mars. (Here again, if one seeks to put off the decision, one has effectively chosen to reject the opportunity.)

A living, forced, momentous option James calls "a genuine option," and he asserts that, when in such a situation — when given a genuine option — and in the absence of arguments that should clearly incline us to one side or another, a "passional" element is appropriate - even necessary — in making up one's mind.[12] James writes:

> Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.[13]

A passional decision is a decision of the will, not made on the basis of evidence or argument, or even on expected utilities (i.e., on the consideration of costs and benefits). And James concludes that, in such a situation — that is, even in the absence of sufficient evidence[14] — "we have the right to believe at our own risk any *hypothesis* that is live enough to tempt our will."[15] (It is worth reminding ourselves that James is referring to all manner of options and hypotheses, and not just religious ones.)

With this terminology and this conclusion in hand, James confronts Clifford and evidentialism directly.

According to James, the essence of Clifford's maxim is that it is "better go without belief forever than believe a lie."[16] What is James' reply to this?

To begin with, James says that one could just as well argue the contrary — that it is better to be in error many times than lose the

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[13] *Ibid.*,, p. 20.

[14] James writes of Pascal's wager that, whatever weight it has, depends on the hypothesis of Catholic Christianity being a live hypothesis. Why "take to masses and holy water" unless there is some pre-existing tendency in the individual to believe that they might produce the desired effect, and why would one even wager, unless one thought that the outcome had some appeal? Thus, Pascal's wager does not, James thinks, stand on its own, but is dependent upon making the kind of distinctions that James is presenting.

[15] *The Will to Believe*, p. 32, emphasis mine.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

chance at getting the truth[17], and, indeed, in some cases, "the need of acting is ... so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all."[18] Thus, James' first response is that Clifford's evidentialism is, at best, *on a par* with (what some might call) James' putative 'fideism.'

Why should one seriously consider James' alternative? The first point that James makes is that Clifford has not offered any reason for his criterion for legitimate (e.g., reasonable, ethically justified) believing — and, indeed, that there is no good reason to adopt Clifford's criterion over James'. Moreover, whichever principle or standard for legitimate believing we adopt — Clifford's or James' — is not based on argument or evidence, but is itself the result of a 'passional' decision. A refusal to decide, or believe, or choose, simply because we lack "sufficient evidence," is a "passional decision." There is, in short, no reason to hold Clifford's maxim.

But James also suggests that there are good reasons *not* to adopt Clifford's view.

First, it seems to James that "a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truths if those kinds of truths were really there [but evidence for them was inconclusive] would be an irrational rule"[19] — and yet, James says, Clifford's maxim does exactly this. Second, it seems to James that running the risk of believing error is not such a terrible thing; he writes that "[i]t is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound."[20] And, third, adopting Clifford's approach would effectively undermine our holding virtually *all* of our beliefs.

The demand that one always have "sufficient evidence" is, in other words, unreasonable. Besides, James would point out, most of what we believe or claim to know has a very tenuous relation to evidence. Look at the lack of agreement or diversity of opinion on what would constitute sufficient evidence in most fields of human activity (e.g., art, ethics, the law), or the absence of consensus about what is 'self-evident,'

[17]More precisely: James writers that "You ... may ... be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true." (*The Will to Believe*, pp. 24-25).

[18]*The Will to Believe*, p.26.

[19]*Ibid.*, pp 31-32.

[20]*Ibid.*, p.25.

or most people's question begging 'evidence' for their historical and scientific beliefs, and so on.

These considerations challenge, if not refute, the evidentialist insistence on having "sufficient evidence" for legitimate believing; evidentialism, as a universal standard for such believing, is simply implausible. Indeed, James writes that Clifford's view is "the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave."[21]

So, James asks, why embrace Clifford's maxim? Why be skeptical, for example, about matters of religious belief? In fact, if the use of the skeptical 'hypothesis' would prevent one from acknowledging certain kinds of truth (assuming that they could be there), then that hypothesis is itself unreasonable. Skepticism, therefore, is not avoiding risk, but rather taking a side — acting as if believing certain beliefs, such as religious beliefs, was a priori illegitimate — and this, James suggests, is unreasonable. In short, James would claim that he and Clifford are *not* on a par after all; James' approach is more reasonable.

Now, defending the legitimacy of believing without evidence — albeit qualified — may be rather worrisome, and James would probably point out that his own view is not as extreme as might first appear. He does note that, (i) if strong evidence is available for beliefs, then we should seek and have it (though what counts as strong evidence may itself be a matter of opinion), and (ii) if it is not a momentous issue — i.e., where "the need of acting" is not "so urgent" — then we needn't make a choice until the "objective evidence" has come in.[22] In other words, where the matter is trivial (e.g., the consequences are not irreversible); where the hypotheses involved are not 'living' (e.g., we are indifferent to them); and where the choice is not forced (i.e., where we can wait and continue our investigations), it seems that we don't have a 'right to believe.' This is the case with, for example, decisions concerning most scientific questions; must one decide now, *at this moment*, for example, whether Richard Leakey's theories on the origin of the human species, or those of his opponents, are true? Presumably not; as James writes (to give the comment cited above its full expression), "the need of acting is *seldom* so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief

[21] *Ibid.*, p.32.
[22] *Ibid.*, p.26.

at all."[23]

James' suggests that this latter situation applies to most decisions — and that the circumstances warranting the 'right to believe' don't arise all that often.

Still, James does note how important the passional nature of scientists is to scientific activity; the eagerness — and passion — of scientists to make decisions quickly and to act on them has (James points out) probably promoted the development of science. The scientific approach itself — that is, the insistence on the correction of false belief, and the ascertaining of truth — is, again, *itself* something passional. And similarly, moral beliefs are not things that can obviously be known to be 'true' or 'false,' based on conclusive or sufficient evidence; these, too, are matters for our passional nature.[24] Even general evaluative claims — that thing X *is better than* thing Y — usually *cannot* be decided on the basis of evidence alone. Finally, James writes, "Faith in a fact can help create the fact"[25]; sometimes "believing" without evidence makes the belief come true — or, to put it slightly differently, 'believing makes it so.' For example, James notes, if I believe someone likes me, then my behavior towards the other might make that person like me — or, again, my having an optimistic attitude, or believing that the world can be improved through individual effort, may motivate me to act and, thereby, may improve the world.[26] (We see this approach in mundane situations where people say, for instance: 'Dress to be the person you want to be'.) If one waits until he or she has 'sufficient objective evidence', this will likely never come about.

James says that, on Clifford's view, it seems that we shouldn't do any of these things — for example, we shouldn't cooperate with others unless we already have proof that they will cooperate with us. But then nothing will get done. If James is right, then, there may in fact be a large class of cases where one may lack sufficient evidence and yet have a "right to believe" — and perhaps more.

What, then, has James provided so far?

All that we have, to this point, is that James finds that Clifford's evidentialism is unjustified or, at the very least, no more justified than

[23] *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.
[24] *Ibid.*,, p.28.
[25] *Ibid.*, p.29.
[26] *Ibid.*, p.28.

his own alternative. In other words, there is no conclusive reason why one should not sometimes be allowed to believe on insufficient evidence.

Nevertheless, James' view may be able to be pressed even further, for some find hints that, not only can one *have* a right to believe at one's own risk, but that sometimes one *is* right to do so.

2.2. The Reasonability of Religious Belief

It seems clear that, for James, religious is a momentous option — he says that we stand to gain a certain vital good, or lose it if we do not believe. The best things in life are, he writes, "the more eternal things,"[27] and although basic beliefs of religion cannot be verified scientifically, we may be 'better off' right now if we believe them to be true, simply because they are the best.[28] And again, religion seems to be a forced option; we 'lose the good' (of religion, if it is true), unless we refuse to be skeptical and opt for it. What is at stake for us is, therefore, very great indeed — a theist might say, possessing an important truth here and now, but also possibly enjoying eternal life — and so, we might infer, religion ought to be a live hypothesis for us as well.

Thus, reflection on what is at stake suggests that religion is, in the end, a 'genuine option,' whether we like it or not; it *ought* to be a living option for us. If this is true, where might James' argument lead us? Now, it is unlikely that we will ever be in a position to get any more or any better evidence on the matter of religion than we already have. We do not have "an infallible intellect," it is unlikely that we would get any better information if we waited, and it may be the case that it is only if we first believe the hypotheses of religion, that we will get any evidence for them. So, not only do I have a right to believe at my own risk, but it seems that it may even be the case that I *ought* to believe for (as noted earlier) it is 'better to be in error many times than lose the chance at getting the truth.'

Here, then, not only do we have an argument against Clifford's evidentialism, but we have at least the beginning of an argument for the reasonability of believing certain religious beliefs without first

[27] *Ibid.*, p.29.
[28] *Ibid.*, p.30.

having sufficient evidence.

A number of issues have not, however, been addressed. What exactly is (a) religious belief? What makes a religious belief *distinctively* religious? How can we be confident that such putative beliefs are meaningful? What could count as an argument or proof for such a belief — and are such arguments or proofs available to all? And if we do not have any arguments or proofs for a belief, can we in fact make a claim to being reasonable in believing?

Are there, then, any other reasons to hold that at least some elements of religion and religious belief can avoid Clifford's challenge, and that not only does one have a right, but it might be reasonable (or, at least, not unreasonable) to believe? To answer this, we need to look at James' views on religious belief — and he provides some remarks about this in his discussion of religious and mystical experience.

2.2.1 Religious Experience and Religious Belief

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James' focus is not — as his title indicates — on dogmas or doctrines, but on what presumably underlies them — i.e., religious experience. Such experience is central to religion and is, at least indirectly, the source of religious belief(s).

What is religion? James writes in Lecture 3, titled "The Reality of the Unseen," that concerning:

> the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.[29]

More specifically:

> Religion... shall mean for us *the 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. Since the relation

[29] *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [*The Works of William James*, Vol. 15] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 51; cf also lecture 10.

> may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow.[30]

James adds that "In these lectures, however, [...] the immediate personal experiences will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all."[31]

What, then, is religious experience? James presents "personal religious experience" as having "its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness."[32] Such states are characterized by four 'marks': ineffability (i.e., it must be directly experienced, and "defies expression" to others); a noetic quality (they are authoritative insights or states of knowledge); (and, less centrally) transient; and passive (i.e., one's own will is not active; a superior power is in control). We should also add a fifth characteristic implicit in the above: that religious experience is a 'perception' — James writes that "mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us. [...that] they are absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality [...and] face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist."[33]

Religious experience is noetic — it provides knowledge. The cognitive content of such an experience seems, however, rather limited. For example, James writes that such experience "defies expression" to other individuals; it is "inarticulate" and "imperfectly ... reproduced in memory."[34] Moreover, what remains after the experience is not the content of the experience, but rather "the profound sense" of its "importance" and "significance."[35] James also emphasizes, however, that religious experience is 'authoritative.' By authoritative here, James

[30]*Ibid.*, p. 36, emphasis mine.

[31]*Ibid.*, p. 34.

[32]His account is, as he says, "second hand"; he writes: "my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely" (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 301).

[33]*Ibid.*, p. 336.

[34]*Ibid.*, *e*, p. 303.

[35]*Ibid.*, p. 336.

does not — at least, not explicitly — mean 'rationally authoritative' — but, rather 'psychologically authoritative' (i.e., he describes it as "a force"[36]). In other words, this authority normally communicates itself into action; it is, as it were, dispositional. James notes as well that its authority is primarily, and perhaps only, over "the individuals to whom they come"[37]; the putative occurrence of these experiences does not place any "duty" on others (who have not had these experiences) to regard them as in any way authoritative. Yet they do seem to have a general value. James writes that the skeptic — the "rationalistic critic" — can have no legitimate cause to deny their possibility or to disallow others from believing them (and believing *in* them), "for there never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added, provided the mind ascend to a more enveloping point of view."[38] As "thinkers," James continues, we cannot "possibly upset" those who believe. Indeed, James insists that "Our own more "rational" beliefs are *based on evidence exactly similar in nature* to that which mystics quote for theirs"[39] — namely, perceptual experience — and so we would have no reason to reject them that could not be used against us and our own beliefs.

What we have here again, then, is the claim that religious beliefs are, in a sense, on a par with non-religious (e.g., empirical or even skeptical) beliefs. But this claim is stronger than that which James makes in "The Will to Believe," about being led to certain conclusions by one's passional nature when one must decide between hypotheses for which one has no conclusive evidence. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the subject of religious experience believes that he does have evidence — indeed, overwhelming evidence — i.e., the experience itself.

Still, how good is such evidence? Is it sufficient to justify believing — holding a belief? And are the beliefs that one has, in such cases, reasonable? warranted? or true? (Or, given the apparent subjective and personal character of religious belief, is it that such beliefs are simply not unreasonable or, at the very most, are reasonable or warranted, though only for the believer?)

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 335.
[37] *Ibid.*.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 338.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 335-6, emphasis mine.

To look at how James would determine whether a belief is reasonable, warranted, or even true requires some comments about James' pragmatism.

2.3. Pragmatism and argument, justification, and proof

James' 1907 *Pragmatism* provides us with a theory of meaning, a theory of truth, and also a theory of justification or warranted belief:

To begin with, for James, "to develop a thought's meaning, we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance"[40]; in other words, we know what something *means* when we know what its effects are and what "practical difference" in concrete experience the notion or proposition would make if it were true.[41]

James' 'pragmatic' view of truth follows from this. James writes: "'the true'... is only the expedient."[42] What this sometimes misunderstood remark means is that efficacy in practical action provides a determination of the truth of a proposition. Thus, a belief is true when it enables me to function or act in an effective way. James also states that truth is a property of ideas, and their 'agreement' with 'reality.'[43] But by 'agreement', here, James does not mean a simple correspondence theory; rather, it is that the belief 'fits' with the way the world is.

So, how would we determine whether a proposition (or an idea) were true? James gives us a number of criteria of truth intended, no doubt, to be roughly synonymous. A theory or idea is true — just in proportion to its success in solving [the] 'problem of maxima and

[40] *Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways Of Thinking - Popular Lectures On Philosophy* [*The Works of William James*, Vol. 1] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1975, p. 29.

[41] "There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere — no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact" (*Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 30).

[42] *Pragmatism*, p. 106. "'*The true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving.* Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas."

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

minima'[44]

— as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate[45];

— so far as the idea 'pays'[46], and there is a 'practical value of true ideas'[47];

— so far as it is 'whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief... for definite, assignable reasons,[48] which includes what is "helpful in life's practical struggles[49];

— so far as it proves "to have a value for concrete life,"[50] although this will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged.[51];

— so far as it leads us through the acts and the other ideas it instigates[52] (truth is an "affair of leading" [53]).

Finally, a belief is justified when it is verified — i.e., when one acts on it and it does not lead to surprises[54]; this is, perhaps, another way of saying that beliefs must in some way 'agree with reality.'

We should note a few things about this pragmatic approach. Claims to truth and to justification are always contingent; they must enable us to act in the world but, when they cease to have this character, they are, presumably, to be abandoned. Moreover, in principle, any knowledge claim is fallible. James says that pragmatism recognizes this, and that it itself provides criteria for correcting our beliefs and claims to knowledge — including our beliefs and claims about pragmatism itself.

So, given this account of meaning, truth, and justification, and because of the nature of religious experience, it seems that not only can one have a right to believe, and not only can a religious belief

[44]*Ibid.*, p. 35.
[45]*Ibid.*, p. 36.
[46]*Ibid.*, p. 110.
[47]*Ibid.*, p. 98.
[48]*Ibid.*, p. 42.
[49]*Ibid.*
[50]*Ibid.*, p. 40.
[51]*Ibid.*, p. 41.
[52]*Pragmatism*, p. 97.
[53]*Ibid.*, pp. 101, 103.
[54]See Ruth Anna Putnam, "William James," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), Vol. 5, pp. 60-68, at p. 65. See James' remarks on rationality as the "transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension" in "Sentiment of Rationality," p. 317.

be meaningful and psychologically, noetically, and dispositionally authoritative, but it can be reasonable — e.g., so far as it has at least some of the properties of truth: one can function effectively on it, it is consistent with (at least some) other truths, and so on.

There is one further feature of James' account of meaning, truth and justification that should be noted — and that is that we all have a "primary duty" to pursue the truth.[55] Thus, when it comes to the experiences and beliefs of others, we ought not simply say that these are just matters for them — for example, that they are true 'for them.' They are things that, presumably, we all should investigate. And so, here again, we may read James as saying that his is a reasonable alternative to Clifford's maxim and that it is open to religious belief.

3. Some Implications for Meaning, Truth, and Evidence

What has this information from *Pragmatism* and from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* added to James' account of 'the right to believe'? At the very least, it tells us about the meaning of religious belief, how beliefs (including religious beliefs) can be true, and the relation between religious belief and evidence.

3.1 Meaning and truth

In the first place, James has provided a means by which we can determine whether a religious belief is meaningful. Religious beliefs are meaningful when one is able to see how one is to act on them — 'what conduct they are fitted to produce.' In fact, it seems that James would allow that at least some religious beliefs are meaningful — though probably far from all (e.g., those that are very abstract and have no clear relation to acting in one particular way rather than another).

Can religious belief(s) be said to be true? Given his account in *Pragmatism*, we see that James will say that particular religious beliefs can be true *if* such beliefs 'fit' with other beliefs, and *if* one can act on them. Recall that a proposition (or a theory or an idea) is true, for James,

[55]"Ideas that tell us which of them to expect count as the true ideas in all this primary sphere of verification, and the pursuit of such ideas is a primary human duty" (*Pragmatism*, p. 98).

if it allows us to engage in practical activity; if it is what is "helpful in life's practical struggles"[56]; if it proves to have a value for concrete life, and in proportion as it is successful in solving problems.[57] Admittedly, James also says that the truth of beliefs "will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged."[58] Still, he grants that "*if theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true.*"[59] *And so,* if a theological idea "fits every part of life best, and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted', pragmatism "could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful."[60]

Again, as we have seen, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James speaks of some religious beliefs as having, at the very least, a 'subjective' truth.[61] He writes that one can say that a religious belief is properly authoritative in one's own life, when one can act on it. But James also seems to wish to hold that such beliefs have to be more than subjectively true. For consider his response to a theory that he thinks fails the 'pragmatic' tests of truth — namely belief in the theory of the Absolute, held by his erstwhile colleagues, the British idealists. James says that such a theory:

— tells you nothing about life;

— allows us to avoid responsibility and take a moral holiday (though sometimes taking such holidays is not altogether a bad thing);

— is associated with a false logic; and

— entangles one in metaphysical paradoxes.[62]

And, later, he writes that this "notion of the Absolute" "clash[es] with other truths."[63]

In general, then, our hypotheses "carry supernumerary features" — and what this means is that their truth will have a public, and not merely a subjective character. But if this must be the case for metaphysical beliefs, such as beliefs about the Absolute, then presumably it must be

[56]*Pragmatism*, p. 42.
[57]*Ibid.*, p. 35.
[58]*Ibid.*, p. 41.
[59]*Ibid.*, p. 40; italics are James'; the bolding is mine.
[60]*Ibid.*, p. 44.
[61]See *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 399-401.
[62]See *Pragmatism*, pp. 41-3.
[63]*Pragmatism*, p. 43.

equally so for religious beliefs.

For James, then, it makes sense to say that religious beliefs can not only be meaningful, but true.

3.2 Evidence

While James clearly challenges the evidentialist account of the kind of relation that ought to exist between religious belief and evidence, it remains for him to explain what, precisely, this relation is. Here, we need to recall his 'negative' case against Clifford, but also consider his positive view of the relation between evidence and reasonable believing.

3.21 Against Clifford

What reasons might one give for adopting Clifford's view? It does seem plausible to say that requiring "sufficient evidence" reminds us of our epistemic responsibilities and serves at the very least as a heuristic standard — and so it should not be lightly dispensed with. For if the object of investigation and inquiry is knowledge (i.e., true belief), then having a rigorous, reliable standard for knowledge and justified believing is certainly useful.

Yet, as noted above, Clifford does not provide any reason for his 'maxim'; rather, he simply urges us to adopt his view. Nor does it appear possible to provide evidence for such a maxim without begging questions. Besides, it seems that most of our believing and our beliefs — including our perceptual beliefs — could never meet such a standard. Neither does it seem that this standard, as Clifford gives it, is one which could be rigorously adhered to if one wished to engage in any scientific research. In any event, the notion of "sufficient evidence" that Clifford uses, is vague. Indeed, what counts as sufficient evidence is, arguably, contextual; it depends on the nature of the discussion and, arguably, on the interests of the interlocutors involved. Thus, the standard of sufficient evidence in one domain may be impossible or inappropriate in another.

Clifford suggests that evidence must be empirical and public, and of a sufficient quality to convince others. (His model of proof is that

of a law court.[64]) But, James would point out, this effectively limits what things are open to reasonable belief, and it effectively eliminates religious experience a priori; e.g., given that religious experience is usually private, there is no way, on Clifford's account, that any propositions based on religious experience could be established as true.

As noted earlier, for James, if Clifford's view would prevent a person from drawing on certain kinds of experience or acknowledging certain truths or kinds of truth, then Clifford's standard concerning evidence and sufficient evidence is unreasonable. So, in the absence of a persuasive reason for adopting Clifford's maxim, James would (rightly) conclude that we are not only entitled to demur from it, but we may even have a positive reason to reject it as a general standard for rational believing.

3.22 The relation of religious belief and evidence

As we have seen, James has not only written that we hold, but suggests that it may be reasonable to hold, some beliefs without evidence, and that believing, then, can — and can rightly and perhaps reasonably — take place in the absence of sufficient evidence. James is surely correct that many of our beliefs are held before, and independently of, argument and proof, and that people may legitimately believe certain things without evidence (given the provisos noted in section 2.1 of this paper, above). This applies as much to empirical and ethical beliefs as religious beliefs.

But can there ever be evidence for religious belief? If so, what kind of evidence does James have in mind? Can this evidence be sufficient or conclusive? Is having such evidence necessary for being reasonable in believing?

Let us begin with this first question — whether we can have evidence for a religious belief. From what we have seen, James' answer is a clear 'yes' — for example, for those beliefs which are the product of, or related closely to, religious experience. This evidence is also empirical.

[64]For a discussion of this aspect of Clifford, see my "Evidentialism at its Origins and Anglo-American Philosophy of Religion," in *God and Argument/Dieu et l'argumentation philosophique*, ed. by William Sweet (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 1999), pp. 189-213, 205ff.

Recall James' comment that "Our own more "rational" beliefs are *based on evidence exactly similar in nature* to that which mystics quote for theirs"[65] — namely, perceptual experience. Thus, empirical evidence is relevant to religious belief. Moreover, James presumably holds that we cannot be indifferent to the need for some evidence in holding a belief; the general pragmatist duty to seek the truth is also a duty to seek evidence where it can be found. And, of course, most major religious traditions would allow that there is evidence of some kind for belief, if only the evidence of authority.

But exactly which religious beliefs or what kind of religious beliefs can have evidence? Recall that, for James, 'religion' is "*the feelings, acts, and experiences* of individual men [... as individuals...] in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" — but not the propositions of "theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations"[66]; these latter, recall, are "secondary" and somehow derived from "experiences." Believing that there are mystical experiences is obviously supported by one having had such an experience. But the more specific one's interpretation of that experience — that it involved, for example, a certain kind of being, with particular attributes, and which 'revealed' certain truths, and so on — the more distance there likely is from the actual evidence provided by the original experience itself. And so, one suspects that the creedal beliefs of most religions (e.g., doctrines or dogmas concerning the nature, characteristics, and especially the personality of the Divine — being 'abstract,' possibly entangled in 'metaphysical paradoxes,' being inconsistent or clashing with other claims, and so on) would not be able to derive much support from such (empirical) evidence.

What can one infer from James' remarks concerning whether the evidence that one has, presumably from religious experience, is *sufficient* to establish anything about the content of a religious belief? Is such evidence sufficient to establish its (objective) truth? Or is it sufficient only for one to be responsible in believing it? From what we have seen, it would seem that such 'evidence' may be relevant only to the one who has had the experience — mystical experiences "usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals

[65]See *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 335, emphasis mine.
[66]*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 34.

to whom they come" — and that it has little argumentative force to one who has not had that experience.[67] While it does not follow from this that such experiences are inconsequential, and do not have some 'evidential' value for others, there is no epistemic "duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically."[68]

In general, then, it seems as if evidence is relevant to religious belief, and to believing, when one seeks to justify such a belief. And a belief is justified — or, to be more precise, the believer is justified in holding the belief — when it is at least possibly true (i.e., when it makes a "practical difference" in life, or when it fits the criteria, presented in his *Pragmatism*; see section 2.3 above). One might say, therefore, that the principal difference with Clifford in such cases seems to be over what exactly constitutes "sufficient evidence."

But what about those beliefs which do not have direct or "sufficient evidence" — those which are not directly the product of "mystical states"? Presumably, some could in principle be held reasonably if at least some of the preceding criteria were met — e.g., if they made a "practical difference" to life, and so on. And perhaps some could have a justification of a consequential (or abductive) kind — i.e., when the belief itself is seen to be the best explanation of an event or 'the best answer' to a problem. But, James says, even if these conditions are not met, we may still have a right to believe.

3.23 About the 'Right to Believe'

As we have seen, according to James, we have a 'right to believe' in certain circumstances. These circumstances are not just when we have sufficient evidence — i.e., we have a right to believe when what we know or have good evidence to believe is true — but also, as noted earlier, when we are confronted with a genuine option and we lack complete or decisive evidence. James' claim here, as shown above, is not only a modest one, but a 'negative' one, at that. It is not that one is right to believe. Indeed, in those cases where the matter cannot be decided intellectually, it is not so much that 'One is free to believe,' as that 'There is no reason why one should not be free to believe.' And

[67] See note 37 above; *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 335.

[68] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 335.

even this is not, of course, without conditions; it holds only so long as additional or decisive evidence cannot be found, and it says only that there is no reason why one should not be free to exercise this right at his or her own risk.

What is the 'source' of such a right?

First, without such a right (which is, of course, subject to certain conditions) we are destined to inaction on certain issues. Given James' apparent view that it 'is better to be in error many times than lose the chance at getting the truth'[69] — something which is consistent with James' criteria for truth — he would understandably hold, therefore, that one has a right to act in this way.

Second, in *Pragmatism*, James provides some positive grounds for holding that one has such a right to believe. For, recall, James writes that we have a "duty" to pursue or to gain truth[70], which is part of our general obligation to do what "pays."[71]. Of course, we do not know at the beginning of any investigation what is true; "absolute truth ... is that 'ideal vanishing point.'"[72] And so we need to be able to look for truth — and this may involve making certain assumptions, and believing things... but, of course, at our own risk.

There is, it seems, a third reason why James may think that we have such a right to believe — and that is simply because the belief is (or may be) true. For, as noted above, James thinks that religious beliefs can be meaningful. Moreover (as we have also seen above), at least some such beliefs are naturally authoritative, and so it is lawful or reasonable to hold them. And so long as there are no more powerful reasons against them (e.g., that such beliefs do not 'fit' with other beliefs known to be true, or if one cannot act on them), and if believing them provides certain benefits for the believer (e.g., they are actually helpful), then they meet James' criteria for the right to believe at one's own risk — i.e., it is at least not unreasonable to believe them.

According to James, then, what does such a right provide us? Such a right, strictly, allows us to believe certain hypotheses or truth claims, in certain specified situations, at one's own physical, moral, and epistemic risk. More broadly, it allows us to carry out our duty to pursue the

[69]Cf. *The Will to Believe*, pp. 24-25.
[70]*Pragmatism*, p. 110.
[71]*Ibid.*, pp. 110, cf. p. 104.
[72]*Ibid.*, p. 106.

truth, to act, and, perhaps, to find or bring about that truth. While this 'right' does not entail the belief being true or probable or even possible, nor that one is right to believe, it does allow that, in the circumstance of being confronted with a genuine option, believing certain hypotheses is allowable at one's own risk and, to that extent, 'reasonable.'

3.3 Summary

In short, then, given his analysis in "The Will to Believe," and given his views on argument and proof in *Pragmatism* and his analysis of religion and religious belief in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James may be seen as having made a case for five claims: that Clifford's evidentialist maxim or standard is inappropriate to belief in general and to religious belief in particular; that religious belief can, at least in principle, be meaningful and true; that there can be evidence for some religious beliefs; that, nevertheless, "sufficient evidence" is not necessary to lawfully or reasonably holding a belief; and that we have a right to believe — at least in certain cases where evidence is unavailable or unobtainable. It is also clear that James thinks that we ought to take religious belief seriously; we need not be skeptical — at least, not rigorously so — concerning such belief

But are these claims successful?

4. Assessing James

James provides, in part, a reply to Clifford on the conditions for legitimate — reasonable — believing, but he also provides, I have suggested, a positive account of the nature of religious belief, its relation to evidence (i.e., when and how evidence is relevant and sufficient), but also of when and how without sufficient evidence, believing is still legitimate (i.e., reasonable, or not unreasonable). His account has comforted many who were challenged and discomfited by the apparently harsh scepticism of Clifford, but it is important to be clear about what, exactly, James has shown -- and, further, how far this gets us in understanding the relation of reason and religious belief.

4.1 Religious belief

Does James in fact provide us with a clear understanding of religious belief?

To begin with — and perhaps paradoxically, given all that he has written on the topic — James does not seem to have told us very much about what religious belief is. James writes that religion is about "feelings" and "experiences" of individuals, and that it is "authoritative." But this does not give us much content. Admittedly, James says that religion involves a "belief that there is an unseen order," and that "our supreme good lies in ... adjusting ourselves" to it. He adds that experiences — mystical states, for example — "tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest. They offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset."[73] But these hypotheses are rather generic, and they do not seem to be distinctive of any of the major religious traditions. Moreover, James does not explain clearly the relation of these hypotheses to religion and religious belief itself. Beyond the generic comments above, mystical experience gives us little information about religion, religious traditions, or religious belief. Perhaps one should not be surprised. James' remarks on the theory of the Absolute also suggest that little can be said about the more theological of philosophical aspects of matters that go beyond the observable and testable.

James also has not explained clearly what it is to 'believe.' His remarks in "The Will to Believe" suggest that to believe something is primarily cognitive, that belief is believing propositions or hypotheses, and that one can *choose* to believe a proposition — though there is certainly some reason to think that this latter, for example, may not be so; for example, it is not at all obvious that our epistemic states are under our control. James' remarks in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* suggest, on the other hand, that belief is the product of mystical religious experience — though what it means to believe here seems rather different (e.g., it appears that religious belief is more dispositional than cognitive), and how far 'believing' after such experience involves 'believing propositions' is not at all clear.

[73] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 339.

Further, James does not say much about what makes a religious belief *distinctively* religious. At times, James holds that it is something about the content of the belief — e.g., a reference to "whatever [one] may consider the divine" or to "an unseen order." But it presumably involves one's feelings and attitudes towards this as well. What would such an attitude or feeling be, and what is its relation to the beliefs in question? Would it be a feeling that the source of one's belief or believing is authoritative? (Yet this would not explain how the religious doubter or skeptic could be said to be referring to *religious* beliefs.) Does what makes a religious belief religious depend on how one comes to acquire it — i.e., that a religious belief is a belief that is acquired in a certain way? James account is, again, vague here. While James does hold that some religious beliefs are the beliefs that one has after certain mystical experiences, this simply brings us back to a matter of its content which, as we have seen, is rather vague and generic. Besides, whether and how one acts upon such beliefs is also relevant to calling them religious, for it seems to be something about the experience, and not just its content, that is particularly important here.

This affects the issue of how one can say that religious beliefs are meaningful. As we have seen above, to say that a belief is meaningful involves, at the very least, that one knows how to act on it — perhaps, how acting if it were true is different from acting if it were false. In general, then, to understand the meaning of a belief, one must know its cognitive content and how it bears on action. But consider such putative religious beliefs as "God is love," "All is one," or "Jesus is the Son of God." If we say that we know what these propositions mean, we not only need to be able to show that they are logically coherent; we would have to explain, presumably, which actions or activities follow from them, and how. If we cannot do this, on James' account, it is difficult to understand how one might be said to believe it.

In short, then, James clearly needs to provide a more complete account of belief, adequate to the phenomenon of religious belief.

4.2. Evidence

Has James given us an adequate account of the relation of religious belief to evidence? James does say that evidence is possible — that is, as we have seen above, experience can "tell us" or "offer us" hypotheses.

Such evidence is certainly relevant to belief — to the reasonability of believing and also of the truth of that belief. But all such evidence is, presumably, empirical — it is, after all, based on experience. (James is rather skeptical about 'rationalist' arguments for religious belief[74], in keeping, it would seem, with his comments on the rationalism of theories of the Absolute). Moreover, what would make evidence *good* evidence for religious belief is still unclear.

This may not be a problem, some believers may think, because — unlike many empiricists — James is open to religious experience, and so we can say that such experience can and does count as evidence. But, as we have seen, the content of such experience is rather general, and what conclusions one can draw from it will presumably be general as well; what it can provide would not seem to go very far in supplying evidence for the more philosophical or theological of religious or metaphysical beliefs.

Of course, some religious beliefs are alleged to be based on ordinary perceptual experience — the witnessing of, for example, miracles. Here, the content of the proposition may be more specific than those arising from religious experience, and one can say that one has as strong an evidence as can be supplied — i.e., direct perceptual evidence. But such an alternative may be question-begging; is it a miracle that one is witnessing (which supposes the existence of the Divine), or simply an 'extraordinary event'? Besides, as we have seen, James insists that traditional arguments for religious belief — e.g., those based on experience of what is "in the world" — are problematic.

But of course, and in any event, most of the religious beliefs that one has are neither mystical nor based on sense perception — that 'Jesus changed water into wine,' or that 'Muhammad was transported at night from Mecca to the site of Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem' are, rather, beliefs based on testimony, learned from reading scripture or from traditions passed down from one's ancestors. Here, the content is putatively cognitive — though some may argue that such events were more allegorical or 'spiritual' than descriptive — but then they are also subject to the usual standards for evaluating testimony.

There is a further issue that needs to be raised concerning religious belief and evidence. In general, James' view of the relation of religion

[74] See *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lect. 18.

and evidence 'reduces' the status of religious beliefs to 'empirical hypotheses.' This, however, not only entails that they are subject to general empirical criteria for truth and falsity, but is also inconsistent with what James recognizes as their epistemically 'authoritative' and dispositional character. James' view of the relations between belief and evidence, then, clearly needs a more careful working out.

4.3. The Right to Believe

This leads us to the matter of 'the right to believe.'

To begin with, what does it mean to have a right to believe? How can it be a *right*? I have suggested that, for James, it is not really a right at all — it is not simply that one is free to believe, but rather that there is no reason why one should not be free to believe... at one's own risk. One understands that, in situations of urgency such as that of a "genuine option," it may be reasonable just to decide and act. But might not other such situations, which do not involve explicitly considering options, warrant such a 'right' as well? It is not obvious that James has sufficiently considered the conditions in which such a 'right' should be available.

In the second place, which beliefs do we have a right to believe? As we know, according to James, we have a right to believe any hypothesis, provided it is part of a genuine option — i.e., a living, forced, momentous option.

But this supposes, as noted earlier, that the hypothesis is *meaningful* — that one knows what it means and how, for example, to act properly or appropriately on it. James, moreover, has given us reason to believe that the number of substantive religious beliefs (e.g., those founds in creeds and dogmas) which can be said to be meaningful may be rather limited indeed. (For example, consider beliefs like ' God is love' or 'God is an infinite individual,' or 'One will be reborn after one dies.' It is not obvious that many believers know what such beliefs means — and determining the meaning of such claims would require at the very least extensive examination, investigation, and scrutiny. Surely, until one knows the meaning of a proposition, one cannot have a right to believe it — for what would one be believing, and how would one know that the relevant evidence is not available? It seems that, in many cases, a right to believe would be quite unhelpful.

There is another aspect of this issue that is relevant here. James supposes that the hypotheses which one has a putative right to believe are hypotheses within genuine options. But how much of one's believing — how many of one's decisions — fall into this category (i.e., that one is attempting to choose between alternatives which are not only living, but forced, and believed to be momentous, where the decision "cannot by its nature be [made] on intellectual grounds")? Indeed, for most believers, the decision would have already been made, and the 'alternative' not a 'live' one; James gives no reason to believe that such a right can be acquired 'retroactively.' Besides, which beliefs are likely to be the beliefs which one may have a right to believe? That 'There is a God' might be one — but would this apply to other, more abstract beliefs (e.g., the Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection)? In short, again such a 'right to believe' would seem to apply in only a very limited number of cases.

A third issue that arises is how far such a right extends. If one 'decides' to believe a certain hypothesis, does one therefore have the right to continue believing it, or should one also continue to look for evidence? James does not address this latter question in "The Will to Believe," but given his account of the fallibilistic character of 'truth' in *Pragmatism*, it would seem that ongoing investigation is required. In other words, having such a right does not obviously free or absolve one from the obligation to continue to search for evidence. Even if it is the case that, at the point of the decision, the 'option' "cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds", it does not follow that the matter can never admit of 'intellectual resolution'. For example, additional information that may be uncovered and that makes the belief implausible or less plausible than an alternative — that it is incoherent, does not help in dealing with life, and so on — would presumably make such a right, moot. In such cases, then, having a right to believe may not extend particularly far.

Yet, if this is so, we have a position that is much closer to Clifford's than we have been led to think. For example, recall James' discussion, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, concerning the theory of the Absolute, and his view that this theory fails the 'pragmatic' tests of truth — that it tells one nothing about life, allows us to avoid responsibility and take a moral holiday, entangles one in metaphysical paradoxes, and so on. If this is true, then one might well ask which *theological*

truths (e.g., the Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection), if any, might fare any better. And if this, too, is true, then how much of religious belief would James' view allow us to have the right to believe?

Fourth, what exactly does this right to believe provide us with? Does it in fact provide an assurance that our believing is, indeed, reasonable? As we have seen, this right to believe is, at best, negative, and seems to apply only in certain very limited cases. But the 'mechanism' of how one decides is also problematic here. Aside from such questions as What exactly is one's 'passional nature'? And how does or would one's passional nature decide, or enable one to decide, a case?, we surely have good reasons for thinking that our passional nature (e.g., emotion, desire, fear, hope, and so on) is unreliable as a defensible belief-producing means. In fact, against James, it seems reasonable to say that the more important a decision, the more reluctant we should be to decide or act on the basis of what we `feel' to be important and in the absence of good or conclusive reasons. (Similarly, the fact that something satisfies our passional nature, again, does not entail that it is true.) James does not give us any guidance on these issues, and so the recourse to a right to believe is problematic at best.

Finally, even if one has a right to believe, such a right would not to go far enough for most believers, and would likely be regarded as unimportant or irrelevant. Such a right not only does not give us truth, it cannot give us truth.

In "The Will to Believe," the issue of truth is entirely separate from a right to believe; James' method for determining when it is reasonable to believe a religious or ethical belief is quite separate from the issue of whether such a belief is true. To say that something is (or is not) a "genuine option", for example, does not mean that it is (or is not) true; all James asks is whether it makes an "electric connection" with the person concerned, i.e., whether it fits in with what he or she already thinks is important. Thus, if one is asked why she doesn't believe the statement "The Islamic religion is only way to God", to reply that it isn't a "genuine option" for her is irrelevant to whether it is true.

This is a clearly worrisome view; presumably one, if not the main, reason why people are committed to their beliefs is because they are true — not just because they feel strongly about them. If one's beliefs were not thought to be true, then one would normally think he shouldn't believe it. (It is for just this reason that James' approach has been

accused of allowing people to become complacent and entrenched in their prejudices.) Letting our passional natures decide such issues, then, is problematic. It is not only an unreliable mechanism for determining truth, but if there is some likelihood a some proposition or belief is not true, it seems that this is at least a prima facie case against it being reasonable or allowable to believe it.

4.4 Summary:

James provides a broader account of religion than what we find, for example, in Clifford. He acknowledges its psychologically and dispositionally authoritative character, and there are suggestions that, as a result, it has an important role in the believer's understanding of the world — in the believer's noetic framework. James also notes that religion has a propositional character. Indeed, when James speaks of a right to believe, it is a right to believe certain propositions.

I have argued, however, that James' view of religious belief is problematic. Moreover, when it comes to the meaningfulness and the truth of such belief, we find that it focuses on it as largely propositional. Furthermore, evidence is simply empirical evidence, and whatever evidence one might have for religious belief, it is no different in kind from evidence in ethics, law, science, and so forth. While James' account of religious belief is more nuanced than Clifford's, he does not explain the relation of the psychologically authoritative or noetic character of religious belief and this propositional character. Finally, James' account of a right to believe certain hypotheses is defective. It supposes, for example, that the hypotheses or propositions concerned are meaningful — which, given James' criteria for meaning, may be rather difficult to assure — and unless one knows the meaning, one has *no* right to believe. I have also argued that such a right cannot extend very far — that it not only seems to exclude certain beliefs, but the right itself is contingent.

Ironically perhaps, James' view may not be as far from Clifford's as many have thought.

5. Conclusion:

James' account of religious belief and the legitimacy of believing

has been an influential one, and his criticisms of classical evidentialism are telling. Moreover, James has shown an unusual breadth in his analyses, insisting that his pragmatism "will entertain any hypothesis"[75] and, presumably, experience — and, hence, is at least open to the phenomenon of religious experience. Indeed, James sought to open the mind — even the agnostic mind — to *all* experience (not just that of the senses).

There are several differences between James' account of religion and religious belief and that which we find, for example, in Clifford. The principal differences seem to be, in the end, whether one has a moral and epistemic right to believe when evidence is not sufficient, and what exactly can count as evidence and sufficient evidence and justification for believing.

Nevertheless, James' account does not get far in understanding what religious belief is, or in talking about the rationality of religious belief.

To begin with, James says little new about religious belief — and what he provides is inadequate as a description of the phenomenon. He acknowledges its authoritative, noetic character, but only in a context where content counts for very little, and he notes its propositional character, but only without taking full account of its relation to one's disposition to act or its relation to how the believer understands the world. Both dimensions are clearly relevant to religious belief, but James has not brought them together.

Second, while James considers the meaning of religious belief independently of its truth, his criteria for meaning seem almost purely behavioural — i.e., to see what 'practical difference' it makes in conduct. While this does focus on practice and lived experience, the notion of meaning and truth as making a 'practical difference' risks begging a number of questions — and besides, James fails to articulate clearly what this criterion means.

Finally, James' account of the legitimacy or reasonableness of believing, and of the truth of belief, is, at best, unsystematic and, arguably, inconsistent. For James, belief *ought* to have evidence, if evidence is available, and it is one's duty to have or get evidence. It is only when evidence is lacking that one has a 'right to believe' — but

[75] *Pragmatism*, p. 44.

even then, one needs to ascertain the meaning of what one believes, according to criteria that apply to all beliefs, and one has an ongoing duty to seek evidence. Evidence clearly does bear on both the truth of belief and the legitimacy of believing, but how this relation is to be understood appears to remain undeveloped. On the fundamental issue of the relevance of and the preference for empirical evidence, in fact, James and Clifford do not seem particularly far apart. This leads one to wonder whether perhaps, in the end, James' view is not all that much of an advance over evidentialism.

James did think that one could say something about the Transcendent, and one might hold — given his analysis of religious belief, the relation of religion to evidence, and the 'right to believe' — that it would not be unreasonable to believe in it. In the end, however, it appears that James' account does not bring us very far, and that many of the standard challenges to belief in a Transcendent remain. To defend such a belief, and to defend the reasonableness of religious belief in general, it is clear that we need to employ another approach.