



# BULLETIN of THE NORTH TEXAS CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT

The Fellowship Of Unbelievers Throwing light on Facts and their Logical Consequences since 1994

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## VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

American physician, psychologist and philosopher William James gave the prestigious Scottish Gifford Lectures on “natural theology” in 1901-2. These were collected in the book The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature. It remains required reading in many college courses and should be read by anyone seriously interested in religion, in “spirituality” as the search for and encounter with meaning and purpose, and in how these appetites and their satisfaction relate to and inform us about the human condition. Not only is this work interesting itself but it sheds light on where matters stood in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries with respect to supernaturalism.

James undertook to consider the “religious experiences” that he argued are at the roots of all organized religions. He acknowledged that such experiences can be explained by physical processes with no need to invoke the supernatural. But none of this adequately accounts for the subjective meaning of and the impact upon the lives of people who have had such “religious experiences.” Yet we may still judge states of mind, writes James, according to their “character of inner happiness” and their “consistency with our other opinions and their serviceability for our needs.” The difficulty is that, as James says:

“Inner happiness and serviceability do not always agree. What immediately feels most 'good' is not always most 'true,' when measured by the verdict of the rest of experience. ... If merely 'feeling good' could decide, drunkenness would be the supremely valid human experience. ... The consequence of this discrepancy of the two criteria is the uncertainty which still prevails over so many of our spiritual judgments. There are moments of sentimental and mystical experience ... that carry an enormous sense of inner authority and illumination with them when they come. But they

come seldom, and they do not come to everyone; and the rest of life makes either no connection with them, or tends to contradict them more than it confirms them. Some persons follow more the voice of the moment in these cases, some prefer to be guided by the average results. Hence the sad discordancy of so many of the spiritual judgments of human beings.”

James' view is that theology and the ecclesiastical aspects of religion are only the secondary products of religious experiences. Nevertheless, he wrote:

“The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion. Then, indeed, our intuitions and our reason work together, and great world-ruling systems, like that of the Buddhist or of the Catholic philosophy, may grow up. Our impulsive belief is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but its showy translation into formulas. The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow. ... I do not yet say that it is better [*emphasis in the original*] that the subconscious and non-rational should thus hold primacy in the religious realm. I confine myself to simply pointing out that they do so hold it as a matter of fact.”

What makes experiences “religious,” notes James, is that they are interpreted as encounters with whatever those having the experiences consider to be “the divine.” By this he does not mean supernatural personal being(s) but what is “most primal and enveloping and deeply true.” James gives the ex-

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ample of reports of people saying that they have “felt a presence.” Anyone may have this, of course, and it need not be interpreted as feeling the presence of supernatural beings. But when it is so interpreted, it is a “religious experience.”

James presents many accounts of such experiences and finds that “mystical” ones are usually spontaneous, unpredictable and involuntary, as well as transient, “ineffable” in the sense of being difficult or impossible to express in words, and “noetic.” By this last James means “illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, ... and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.” James then spends a good deal of time considering the effects of temperament – of innate, natural, seemingly personality-determined optimism or melancholy – on how religious experiences are interpreted and their impact on people. He describes the “mind-cure” movement of his day, also then referred to as “The New Thought” and linked to the new religion of Christian Science founded in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910). This bears many similarities to the contemporary “New Age,” positive thinking and “The Law of Attraction.” James contrasts the “healthy-minded” with the “sick-souled” or “morbid-minded.” The first sort of person, the “once born” hardly has need of a transformation brought about by a religious experience. But the latter, the “twice-born,” seem to need what they take to be an encounter with the supernatural to find hope and meaning in life.

James expresses little skepticism of supernatural claims and refers to himself and his readers – once – as “us Christians.” Towards the end he delves into the vague and confusing ambiguities of supernaturalism and what he calls “over-beliefs” concerning them. But he is no fundamentalist and does not proselytize. On the contrary, he approvingly quotes the Unitarian-Transcendentalist quasi-atheist Ralph Waldo Emerson early on and uses it as an example of how broadly “religion” and “the divine” should be understood. There are many good ideas here for Freethinkers as James is mostly interested in the various ways in which religious experiences affect different sorts of people. Many of these ideas are easily adapted to the stance of Freethinkers. For it is this subjective dimension of the human condition that Freethinkers, too, take to be what is essentially religion.

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought) - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

**Social Luncheon:** Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason’s Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

**Freethought Salon:** Discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant “The Vineyard” - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

**Game Night:** Nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Dominion, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

**Have Another Idea?** Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at [www.churchoffreethought.org](http://www.churchoffreethought.org) LIKE US at [www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/](https://www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/) and sign up for our Twitter feed at [twitter.com/ntcof](https://twitter.com/ntcof) !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:  
“FRANKENSTEIN”  
at 200 years  
> Sunday, May 6, 2018 <  
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH  
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then take the frontage road east just past the Best Western; service starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee and snacks - you can bring some! - and conversation)**

**THANK YOU !!  
FOR YOUR GENEROUS  
DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL  
SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!  
It is needed, appreciated and  
Tax-Deductible !**

**The North Texas Church of Freethought  
The Fellowship of Unbelievers**

Pastor (It's a job description, not a title!) Tim Gorski  
Presenters (how about YOU?).....David Collins  
Tim Gorski  
Social Media Czar.....Aaron Kelton  
Welcome Coordinator.....Mark Barnick  
Videographer.....John Gauthier  
Webpage Management.....Saturn Consulting

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