Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the modern existential condition as a continuous loss of the once cosmic centrality of human existence appears to be accompanied by a complementary and opposing tendency of growing anthropocentrism and sociocentrism. The anthropocentric reductionism in the nineteenth-century interpretation of religious phenomena and especially of religious experience by Ludwig Feuerbach is expanded to, among others, the sociocentric functionalism in reading religions in Émile Durkheim. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural studies have, in various ways, continued this tendency of subjecting all significant realities, all signification, all experience pregnant with meaning, to the regime of human potential and interest, be that interest individual or collective. The dispensation of Being which insinuates that reality is fundamentally and exclusively ready for and defined as the realm of human appropriation, as the space and site of feasibility and machination, as the predominance of what Heidegger called the *Machenschaft*, this dispensation has facilitated and grounded conceptions of cultural and social reality as “fields of cultural production,” as in Pierre Bourdieu, or as social and cultural imaginaries in the complex and sophisticated studies of Cornelius Castoriadis and in the more simplified contemporary analyses of, among many others, Charles Taylor. What these readings of reality have in common is that they do not allow for any (meaningful) outsides of their fields or imaginaries. According to Bourdieu, even radical challenges, say, in philosophy, to established positions in the field of cultural production, will always be defined and delimited by the very field they question (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 496). Speaking of literary production as another example of human meaning-making, Bourdieu dogmatically asserts that “every position-taking is defined in relation to the *space of possibles*.”
It receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the co-existent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it” (Bourdieu, Field 30). There is no escaping from and no breathing space outside the always already humanly appropriated and defined, the solipsistic worlds of sense-making. In terms of the imaginary, Castoriadis argues in similar fashion: “Society brings into being a world of significations and itself exists in reference to such a world. Correlatively nothing can exist for society if it is not related to the world of significations; everything that appears is immediately caught up in this world—and can even come to appear only by being caught up in this world” (Castoriadis 359; emphasis added).

The totalizing features of the social (or, for that matter, cultural) imaginary which negate any outside to its domination are even more starkly asserted by Charles Taylor: “our social imaginary . . . constitutes a horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond” (Taylor, Imaginaries 185). Thinking in the sense of an awareness of a beyond which transgresses the always already defined reality, however, is, ever so simply, that realm of the transcendent, of unforeseen newness as revelation, which we may designate as the space, site, realm, or spreading extension of the religious. Once the religious is functionally subjected to the dominion of the individual or collective subject, once it is absorbed by the all-pervasive presence of fields of cultural production or of imaginaries, once this happens, the religious is in danger of disappearing or of remaining as a mere vestige of its former identity, as an epiphenomenon. The awareness of the religious, of religious experience as a spread, to use a term of William James’s, which extends, by definition, beyond the control of its subjective pole, this awareness in thinkers as different as James, Dewey, Heidegger, or Levinas poses a continuous and serious challenge for the proponents of the dominance of the cultural field or the social and cultural imaginary. The ensuing tension is a particularly fruitful and challenging subject for critical philosophical analysis when it manifests itself as a debate between two thinkers.

In the wider context of this historical tension I present in three parts my thoughts on the significant debate concerning religion in which the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor engages William James’s study The Varieties of Religious Experience. I begin by, first and briefly, introducing Taylor’s book Varieties of Religion Today and its basic attitude toward James. In a second part I critically reconstruct and evaluate what Taylor calls his “conversation/confrontation with William James” (Taylor, Varieties vi). I read this occasionally belligerent conversation as Taylor’s argu-
ment in favor of the power and significance of, especially, social imaginaries. The third and last part is primarily devoted to William James’s conception of the philosophy of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This final part is intended as an apology, a defense of the Jamesian vision, and a critical description of the boundaries or limitations of imaginaries as Taylor understands them.

*William James versus Charles Taylor*

Taylor’s Varieties of Religion Today: *William James Revisited*

In 1902 William James’s 1901 Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University became his best-known and commercially most successful publication, under the title *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. The literary appeal and the theological as well as the philosophical actuality of the work seem not to have diminished during the first one hundred years after its initial appearance. In 2000 Charles Taylor presented several lectures devoted to a critical appreciation of James’s *Varieties* in the Institute for Human Sciences’ Vienna Lecture Series. Appropriately and fittingly, these lectures were published by Harvard University Press in 2002, exactly one hundred years after James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, with the title *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. The change from “religious experience” in James’s title to “religion” in Taylor’s marks, for me, one of the central philosophical problems, concerns, and difficulties posed by Taylor’s “conversation/confrontation with James.” The question arises: What happens once the philosophical inquiry shifts its focus from the live events or processes of experiencing to a substantive entity called religion? Do we still deal with the same matter of thinking, with the identical *Sache*, phenomenologically speaking, or does this shift imply a major ontological difference, or maybe even a fundamental reversal?

Taylor begins and ends his critical discussions of James’s *Varieties* with deeply respectful, often conciliatory, occasionally genuinely appreciative, and sometimes even admiring statements. He commences by noting that James’s position today seems “entirely understandable, even axiomatic, to lots of people . . . [and] central to Western modernity” (Taylor, *Varieties* 13). One of James’s great methodological achievements is the application of “wide sympathy, coupled with unparalleled phenomenological insight” (Taylor, *Varieties* 22). The book ends with this compliment for James: “[He sees] so deeply into an essential feature of our divided age. In some sense religious ‘experience,’ the beginning intimations and intuitions that we feel bound to follow up, is crucial as never before, wherever
we end up taking them in our divergent spiritual lives. It is because he saw this with such intensity, and could articulate it with such force, that James’s book lives on so strongly in our world” (Taylor, Varieties 116).

Taylor’s repeated positive evaluations of James’s study of religious experience are intimately and almost exclusively tied to the seemingly indisputable fact of the ongoing and still impressive contemporaneity or modernity of James’s phenomenological descriptions. If, however, one considers Taylor’s deeply critical assessment of central features of contemporary society and culture, the praise accorded to James tends to take on a decidedly ambiguous hue and character. In his Ethics of Authenticity Taylor diagnoses the fundamental ills of contemporary existential and social reality. He speaks of the three malaises of untrammeled individualism, the pervasive and almost exclusive presence of instrumental reason, and the “alienation from the public sphere and consequent loss of political control” (Taylor, Ethics 10). For Taylor these features indicate seemingly inescapable and yet decidedly negative side effects and aftereffects of the originally positive achievement of individual emancipation in the contexts of the Enlightenment and early modernity. One may therefore wonder whether, in Taylor’s overall view, James’s Varieties is, first and foremost, a profound philosophical assessment of at least one of the only potentially ambivalent traits of modern society and culture in the realm of religion—namely, individualism—or whether the book is not, rather, part and parcel of the latter-day problematic or malaise itself which includes the separation of the individually religious and the public spheres. This is a condition that Taylor calls the post-Durkheimian dispensation, because, according to Taylor, James obviously does not consider, or no longer considers, religious phenomena as functional aspects of or within social realities (Taylor, Varieties 75–107, 95, 111–116). In addition to that, religious experience is qualified by Taylor as only “the beginning intimations and intuitions” of a—so one may surmise—fuller spiritual life (Taylor, Varieties 116); the fuller spiritual life would then, Taylor implies, have to transcend personal, individual experience. This and the seemingly innocuous fact that the term “experience” is set in quotation marks are politely subdued indicators of a fundamental unease in Taylor’s encounter with James’s vision.

There are ways, Taylor proposes in his preface, in which James’s “take on religion could perhaps be considered too narrow and restrictive” (Taylor, Varieties vi). The opening of the first chapter, which presents the case against James most concisely, puts the critical charge “slightly more polemically: one could argue that James has certain blind spots in his view
of religion” (Taylor, *Varieties 3*). James’s approach to religion as a matter of thinking is thus seen as not comprehensive enough, as limited in scope, and as marred by fundamental oversights within the very field of vision (blind spots)—a serious charge especially against a phenomenological thinker. For Taylor the basic problem with James’s thinking is simply and essentially the priority, the preeminence, and the valuation of experience: “James sees religion primarily as something that individuals experience. He makes a distinction between living religious experience, which is that of the individual, and religious life, which is derivative because it is taken over from a community or church. . . . [C]hurches play at best a secondary role, in transmitting and communicating the original inspiration” (Taylor, *Varieties 4–5*).

Taylor questions the legitimacy of distinguishing between religious experience as an existentially privileged, as an authentic personal event and the, from James’s point of view, merely formalized participation in various socially organized, politically institutionalized, collectivized, and more or less public forms of religious practice. Taylor asks, “How are the phenomena of religion distorted or narrowed through being conceived in terms of religious ‘experience’?” (Taylor, *Varieties 20*). The charges of distortion and narrowing imply a serious deviation in James from a true and comprehensive, an undistorted and exhaustive, that is, a philosophically fully competent vision. I now move from Taylor’s value judgments concerning James’s work to his substantial philosophical criticism.

**Taylor’s Conversation/Confrontation with James and the Power of Social Imaginaries**

Taylor understands James’s interpretation of the validity of (religious) experience as closely and problematically related to the role and potential of language and ideas: “So the real locus of religion is in individual experience, and not in corporate life. That is one facet of the Jamesian thesis. But the other is that the real locus is in experience, that is, in feeling, as against the formulations by which people define, justify, rationalize their feelings (operations that are, of course, frequently undertaken by churches). . . . These two are clearly connected in James’s mind. Feelings occur, he holds, in individuals; and in turn ‘individuality is founded in feeling’” (Taylor, *Varieties 7*).

A very basic disagreement emerges here: Taylor doubts whether it is ontologically legitimate to confine the reality, the existence of religion to individual experience and not to extend its true being into what he
calls the “corporate” realm. Taylor defines James’s notion of experience primarily and exclusively as preverbal and preconceptual, as a matter of feeling in a generalized fashion. This does not do justice to James’s sophisticated understanding of the fundamental existential dispositions that he calls feelings. Feelings as inescapable existential dispositions in James do not simply not exclude rationalizations; like moods in Emerson, feelings in James importantly and inescapably color and inflect all perceptual and conceptual appropriations of experience, they convey knowledge, they are “noetic.” 1 Taylor, however, indirectly advances the idea that an adequate analysis of the ontological status of religion demands that it significantly manifest itself primarily in conceptualizations, in “rationalizations,” in communally entertained ideas as the basis of conduct. Conduct, socially viable and recognizable and valuable behavior, a behavior based on and mediated by ideas and concepts, conduct embedded in a social imaginary and articulated in language, becomes an indispensable aspect or ingredient of Taylor’s understanding of religion, a view that James supposedly does not adequately provide for (Taylor, Varieties 23–29). In addition, Taylor deepens his critical objections by exploring James’s problematic insistence on felt experience as the only true and authentic site of religious awareness by way of a more detailed meditation on the, as he sees it, necessary interrelations between individuality, experience, and language:

... one might make the more radical conceptual or transcendental point, that the very idea of an experience that is in no way formulated is impossible. ... experience can have no content at all if you can’t say anything about it. ... A similar set of considerations might be deployed to question the sense in which one can really have an individual experience. All experiences require some vocabulary, and these are inevitably in large part handed to us in the first place by our society. ... The ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives, shape directly what we could call religious experience; and these languages, these vocabularies, are never those simply of an individual. (Taylor, Varieties 26, 27–28)

Not only mystics, Buddhist or Christian or Muslim, could and would seriously and legitimately challenge the validity of the dogmatic statement that experiences must lend themselves to some kind of rendering in language. In order to be valid experiences, mystical experiences as quintessential religious experiences, as James plausibly maintains in chapters 16 and 17 of Varieties, do not need, they even have to dispense with, proper linguistic expression in order to remain true to themselves (James,
Varieties 301–339, 302). Taylor also ignores and does not critically engage James’s anticonceptualist stance, his radical linguistic skepticism, which he succinctly expressed in The Principles of Psychology, stating, “Language works against our perception of the truth” (James, Principles 234). Any perception, as the foundational mode of experiential awareness, James insisted in his last great, unfinished work, Some Problems of Philosophy, any perception in the fullness of its present givenness always exceeds the capability of any language to do it justice: “The deeper features of reality are found only in perceptual experience” (James, Some Problems 53–54; emphasis added). In refuting or ignoring this stance, Taylor obviously believes in some version of the prison-house of language. Neo-pragmatist critics like Richard Poirier have questioned the validity of the metaphor of a prison-house by insisting on the fact that an existing language may and must always be individually inflected, changed, and even radically reconceptualized, that is, troped (Poirier 13–19). Religious experience for Taylor, however, reveals itself as conditioned by, as dependent on the always already preestablished, the vast and total cultural, the inescapably communal network of signs and significations called language. I repeat two of Taylor’s defining statements, with added emphasis: “All experiences require some vocabulary, and these are inevitably in large part handed to us in the first place by our society. . . . The ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives, shape directly what we could call religious experience.” This is a primacy of the word certainly not intended by the famous opening sentence of the Gospel According to Saint John. Human society and its cultural meanings are a first for Taylor. What he calls the “wider whole” in Ethics of Authenticity is the very foundation of true selfhood and individuality; the self is truly a self only if it is grounded in the encompassing other of collective existence. The “wider whole” in Ethics of Authenticity becomes the social imaginary in Taylor’s later writings. This is defined or described in his book Modern Social Imaginaries as a “wider grasp [that] has no clear limits. . . . It is in fact that large unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have. It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary and not a theory” (Taylor, Imaginaries 25).

This—it seems to me—somewhat simplified and vague resuscitation of Castoriadis’s conception of the social imaginary as a totalizing realm of signification has nothing to say about its ontological status (Castoriadis
Taylor presents an ontologically dubious, all-embracing entity without specific location which is supposed to provide the foundation, the orientation, and the possibility of “particular features” and “the sense they have” for our social worlds and thus for its articulation in a communal language and vocabulary which is subsequently, as Taylor maintains, handed to individuals. Because the individual has no say, or only a severely limited say, in determining what or how her or his religious experience is, this experience can never be either primarily individual or, as an alternative, momentous and significant in its silence. Religious experience, the individual awareness of the transcendent, tends to become a culturally and socially conditioned and mediated epiphenomenon. It seems ironic, however, that a philosopher who, as we saw, argues so vehemently against the possibility of an “idea of an experience that is in no way formulated” should nevertheless ground all communal meaning and cultural formations of modernity in a determining, constraining, and socially as well as individually empowering totality called the “social imaginary,” which is characterized as a “large unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation.” This obvious inconsistency does make sense, however, within Taylor’s overall vision of modernity as a “long march” (his metaphor [Taylor, Imaginaries 17]) toward a truly emancipated, secular, liberal democratic society. The numinous, the core of religious experience, has been shifted away from the individual to find a (is it a secularized?) refuge in the transcendental sphere and horizon of the collective social imaginary and its vaguely defined but unlimited power to ground, frame, direct, and provide possibilities of meaning for any and all individual experiences. Taylor’s social imaginary, it appears, offers a new version of the Durkheimian social functionalism in reading religion: “A religion,” Durkheim argued, “is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things . . . [that is,] beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”; or, more abstractly and even closer to Taylor’s vision and terminology, religion is “before all, . . . a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it” (Durkheim 47, 225).

The power of the social imaginary in Taylor’s sense similarly provides the possibility of social cohesion through faith and its communal language. The validity of religious experience as an existential dimension is in turn communally sanctioned and grounded and articulated. This is what in Modern Social Imaginaries he describes as the “space for re-
ligion in the modern state, for God can figure strongly in the political identity” (Taylor, *Imaginaries* 193). Instead “of an ontic dependence [of human society] on something higher,” the sacred, the divine “can still be present to us in the design of things, in cosmos, state, and personal life” and as “the inescapable source for our power to impart order to our lives, both individually and socially” (Taylor, *Imaginaries* 193). Taylor’s position in *Varieties of Religion Today* and in *Modern Social Imaginaries* does in this way raise the question whether he is really dealing with religion or with religious experience or whether his ultimately reductionist grounding of religious phenomena in social imaginaries implies jeopardizing the religious as a *Sache*, as a *phänomenon* in the philosophical sense of the term.

The social imaginary which is at the basis of the long march toward the fulfillment of “the ideal of order as mutual benefit” (Taylor, *Imaginaries* 3, 3–22) in a secular, liberal democratic condition appears in Taylor problematically as total—one hesitates to call it totalitarian—conditioning. This is ominously foreshadowed in *Varieties of Religion Today* when Taylor uses two somewhat haphazardly chosen examples to demonstrate the emergence of religion as a phenomenon of privacy and interiority as dictated, as enforced, by constraints of the social imaginary. Amazingly, already in the late Middle Ages he sees the spread of the “inward form of religion” as the result of “pressure . . . through the preaching of mendicant friars and others” (Taylor, *Varieties* 9); similarly, the prevalence of private religious experience in France in the nineteenth century “stood at the end of a long process in which ordinary believers had been preached at, organized, sometimes *bullied*, into patterns of practice that reflected more personal commitment.—They had been pressed, we might be tempted to say, into ‘taking their religion seriously’” (Taylor, *Varieties* 11; emphasis added).

The total usurpation of the religious by and through the social imaginary in the present is then unmistakably pronounced as dogma in *Modern Social Imaginaries*: “Our social imaginary . . . constitutes a horizon we are virtually incapable of thinking beyond” (Taylor, *Imaginaries* 185). In this way the all-encompassing social imaginary dissolves religious experiencing into the functional historical processes of social, political, and cultural formation.

*James’s Philosophy of Religion and the Boundaries of Social Imaginaries: An Apology*

A study of religious experience was for James, however, not a historical or social, let alone a political or even a cultural concern. The subtitle of
Varieties reminds one that the book is a study of human nature, that is, a philosophical inquiry, presentation, and meditation concerning an essential and indispensable existential and thus an ontological feature of being human. An apology, a defense of William James’s thinking on religion, will therefore have to go beyond the implied assumption of Charles Taylor that all entities and all meaningful aspects of experience, belief, and conduct are primarily and ultimately embedded in and mediated by significations that arise out of the social imaginary as an inescapably antecedent transcendental horizon. I focus here on two major areas of contention in Taylor’s “conversation/confrontation” with William James’s view of the religious that are apt to show the limits of the social imaginary as soon as fundamental ontological and existential questions are raised. The two areas are the interpretations of experience and of the human self. I occasionally enlist the help of what appears at a first and very superficial glance a highly unlikely ally in the project of defending William James, namely, Martin Heidegger. In his 1920–21 lecture on the phenomenology of the religious life, however, Heidegger not only agrees with Ernst Troeltsch’s evaluation of James’s Varieties as the best description of religious phenomena extant (Heidegger 20) but also reads the meanings of Existenziale (foundational aspects of Being, such as experience and selfhood) in an unquestionably radical empiricist—that is, Jamesian—mode (Heidegger 75–86).

The first area of contention is experience. Experience in James, as Taylor interprets it, is essentially characterized by feeling, and in terms of its validity as an aspect of the religious life, it belongs, as we saw, only with the “beginning intimations and intuitions,” that is, not with the fully unfolded reality of religious existence. More fundamental even, and more important, however, in diagnosing the underlying philosophical reasons for their oppositional stances is this seemingly innocuous statement by Taylor on experience, which will help me to open the apologia proper: “James sees religion primarily as something that individuals experience” (Taylor, Varieties 4). In this statement religion is an object, a Sachverhalt, encountered and appropriated by a subject in an act or event called experience. This, however, is not at all what James means by experience. We find what is probably James’s most concise and most profound definition or, more appropriately, interpretation of “experience” in his entry “Experience” for J. M. Baldwin’s Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology (1902), which thus appeared in the same year as James’s Varieties. James states that the term indicates “the entire process of phenomena, of present data considered in their raw immediacy, before reflective thought has analysed
them into subjective or objective aspects or ingredients. It is the summum genus of which everything must have been a part before we can speak of it at all. . . . If philosophy insists on keeping this term indeterminate, she can refer to her subject-matter without committing herself as to certain questions in dispute. But if experience be used with either an objective or a subjective shade of meaning, then question-begging occurs, and discussion grows impossible” (James, “Experience” 95).

Experience designates the “summum genus of which everything must have been a part before we can speak of it at all.” This means that for James, experience is a name for Being in general. As such it necessarily and logically precedes all verbal articulation and the constraints, for example, of social imaginaries. Being as experience occurs before the subject-object split so dear to traditional metaphysical and epistemological modes of thinking. James’s postmetaphysical, radical empiricist thinking therefore demands—in a wonderful pun—that the term experience be kept inde-term-inate, that is, that it be both spoken and unspoken. Experience is the togetherness of an awareness and its “contents,” contents or objects that emerge as such only once “reflective thought” approaches the simple this or there of the really real, the experiential event. Strictly speaking, experience as such in its immediacy cannot be talked about; it issues in nameable aspects and elements only once it has been retrospectively focused in the context of a new event of experience called reflection; in this way a prior experience manifests itself in the form of a testimony. Experience is or provides or shows as what James called “knowledge by direct acquaintance,” as distinguished from retrospective, reflexive knowledge or “knowledge about.” Knowledge by acquaintance is quintessentially religious knowledge for James. One might say and clarify that experience as the summum genus, as Being, as pure experience in the way James defined it in Essays in Radical Experience, is religious experience in a comprehensive sense of the word. It is experience not controlled (as yet) by a human subject-center. It is the openness to the unforeseen, the radically and always revelatory new. Religious experience in a narrower sense of the term, then, would imply tentative appropriations, tentative naming, ascriptions of meaning that are ultimately always at the mercy of those primary reaches of the field of experiencing not subject to human a posteriori appropriation. In this religionsphilosophische position James, however, is neither a modernist nor a mere liberal Protestant contemporary, as Taylor keeps arguing throughout his study of James’s Varieties. The non-social, the individual, the preverbal and immediate, the socially and culturally unmediated character of knowledge by acquaintance has
been universally attested to as the true mark of religious experience in its fullness. Religious experience in its fullness may thus also be understood as the fountainhead of all subsequent, predominantly nonreligious modes of conceptual appropriation of the events of experiencing. In Varieties William James has simply and consistently reaffirmed the testimony of the world's heritage of sincere religious awareness from the Buddha to Teresa of Avila, Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, and Whitman. Religious experience in its primary integrity is, however, not initial as Taylor maintains; it has no necessary telos beyond itself—even though, of course and trivially, it may have all sorts of consequences, primarily nonreligious. Like perceptual awareness, it is, before any appropriation in the context of socially created significations, simply itself. This is what Heidegger calls “faktische Erfahrung,” the concretely specific primary here and now in its ontological authority: in it the self and that which is experienced are not yet, as Heidegger says, “torn apart” (Heidegger 10–14, 9).

One would, however, overlook the true significance of the Jamesian vision of religious experience if he did not sufficiently stress its specific noetic character, which has often been discussed in connection with the gnostic or mystical implications and connotations of such intimate moments of awareness. James himself has given us this summary appreciation of the noetic dimension of mystical experiences and states of the intimate presence of divine existence or the numinous in mystical moments: “They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith. . . . It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be . . . superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world” (James, Varieties 335, 338–339).

The characteristic openness and generosity of James's views, his readiness to accommodate and appreciate other modes of experiential awareness than those generally or socially or culturally or scientifically approved within imaginaries, this genuine fairness not only demands that he allow the possibility and even superiority of the noetic dimensions of religious experience, but also makes him energetically fight and refute the exclusive, the severely reductive, and for him always totalitarian and predominantly modern claims of rational and conceptual or scientific interpretations of experience and the world. Heidegger argues for a similar
refutation of what he calls the theoretical or scientific stance in dealing with religious experience (Heidegger 6 and passim). In his focusing exclusively on the whatness or thing-character of a phenomenon, in this case of religious experience transformed to the status of a mere object called religion, thus in his focusing on the whatness of religion, as does Taylor, the basic meaning and significance of its factual enactment in and as experience defined in a radical empiricist mode is abandoned. In Heidegger’s terminology, the Vollzugssinn is lost; that is, the manifest meaning of the factual presence and event of religious experiencing, which is not attributed to any subject, is jeopardized (Heidegger 62–65). Both James and Heidegger allow the Vollzugssinn of religious experience as a unified moment of authentic awareness to show itself in methodologically identical ways: in Varieties, James presents an abundance of testimonies of religious experiences; he allows the verbal traces of silent noetic experience to manifest themselves without evaluating their truth claims; their existential importance is highlighted simply by his way of gathering the religious heritage within plausible categories testifying to certain family likenesses. Heidegger argues for a similar restraint and aversion to objectification. The phenomenologist of religion will have to be content with a “formale Anzeige”—a formal indication or indexing—of the religious testimony (Heidegger 62–63). Philosophy of religion will present textual manifestations of moments of actual, existentially pregnant experiential presence. In Heidegger’s lecture course the testimony is that of the New Testament: the philosopher of religion allows it to speak of and for itself. He forgoes any ascription of truth value and meaning in the sense of its possible social or cultural or philosophical or even theological function.

At this point I want to move toward the second part of this apology, which deals with James’s philosophical vision of the self as it emerges from his interpretation of experience. This discussion may help refute the strictures in Taylor’s reading of James which focus on his seemingly too subjectivist interpretation of religious experience and practice.

In his book Experience and God, the neo-pragmatist philosopher of religion John E. Smith pointedly asks whether the traditional conceptions of “experience” as “private” are adequate in general and in particular in cases of religious experience. Smith shows convincingly that “the dogma of experience as private, mental content” has to be “challenged as a non-empirical and erroneous view of experience” that leads to “an impoverishment of experience” (Smith 24, 21–45). This critique is legitimate and plausible because the relational character of experiencing established by William James’s radical empiricism evinces the primary, the intimate and
aboriginal co-presence of the so-called subject and the so-called objective content of experience. There is no subject or separate self to begin with, no self that then or later appropriates experiential objects. Selves are experiential; that is, in James’s thinking they belong with and arise out of their worlds of ongoing experience, as Jonathan Levin has shown with impressive subtlety (Levin 61–62). In Heidegger’s phenomenological discussion of religious experience this vision may be paraphrased thus: In the factual enactment of life I do not even experience an ego-object as a separate entity; this is so because experiencing itself always already possesses the character and features of a world, because my self-world is factually indistinguishable from my environing world (Heidegger 13).

Experience, Smith insinuates, is not a matter of subjective inwardness; rather it is a mode in which all of Being, and not only social reality, truly is and manifests itself; this would necessarily and prominently include what experiences identify as the most significant, essential, or the highest mode of “encounter”: the real-ization, the becoming real, in and as experience, of the numinous.

James called the most fundamental mode of experience “pure experience.” Pure experience designates anything that shows itself, or makes itself felt or might be thought of as real in its sheer thisness. In one of his Essays in Radical Empiricism, “The Thing and Its Relations,” James makes it clear that pure experience as the “immediate flux of life,” as the process of Being itself, precedes all “conceptual categories” (including subject and object) and that its purity means “the . . . amount of un-verbalized sensation which it . . . embodies” (James, “Thing” 46). In “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” James described this silent yet dynamic reservoir of possibilities in this way: “The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the “pure” experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple that. In this naïf immediacy it is of course valid; it is there, we act upon it” (James, “Consciousness” 13).

The field of experiencing is therefore neither primarily nor necessarily subjective. This means that for James—and here one must radically challenge Taylor’s reading of James—(religious) experience in its preverbal intensity, as the field of thereness, is exactly not a private or subjective affair, as Taylor insinuates and charges, nor is it a mere socially or culturally determined epiphenomenon. Pure experience, pure religious awareness, for James is an open field of realization within which what we later call the self or subject and the “content” or object of his or her experiencing, the numinous or the holy, are continuous with each other, and do indeed
form a homogeneous spatial realm which may issue in a personal identity and his or her beliefs. First and foremost, however, religious experience as pure experience is a vast this or there which goes beyond any conceptual or subjectivist de-limitations or de-definitions and thus exceeds what may be thought of as existing within the social imaginary. In Varieties James calls this aspect of religious experiencing the More out of which humans may feel themselves addressed (James, Varieties 381–408, esp. 401). This More is, ontologically speaking, radically different from Taylor’s “wider whole” or “corporate life” or “social imaginary,” which he thinks of as determining the language and existence of individuals. James’s More is a realm “into which our beings plunge” (James, Varieties 406), as he says; it is a space at the further reaches of experiencing which we encounter only when we allow for self-surrender, the abandonment of the socially, the historically realized and culturally mediated selfhood, or rather subjectivity, which is constrained by the mandates of social imaginaries. Experience as existential spread without any privileged subject-position, as I have tried to argue, is religious experience proper; it resides before and beyond the confines of social imaginaries, beyond any humanly social or subjectivist concerns whatever. Differing again from Taylor’s reading of James, one has to insist: it is not without language. James says of the More within the primary event of experiencing that it contains “ontological messages” which arrive on the horizons of our experiential sites; he speaks of communications not about reality but of the articulate presence of reality within the event of experiencing itself: “There is a verge of the mind which these things haunt; and whispers therefrom mingle with the operations of our understanding, even as the waters of the infinite ocean send their waves to break among the pebbles that lie upon our shores” (James, Varieties 334).

Religious experience in James, then, is prior to all the determinations we may ever think of as belonging to our real or imagined, our concrete or desired collective existence. The social imaginary is always already transcended here. The expansive spread of religious experiencing does not, as James maintains, show without language; it is not the kind of socially conditioned language Charles Taylor insists on so much in his critique of James. The “ontological messages” or the “whispers” James addresses in the last quotation are his way of modestly and undogmatically reminding his readers of the primacy of a trans-human Logos which speaks within the vast reaches of experiencing and to which we may respond or not, depending on how far we feel ourselves determined, defined, or possibly even hemmed in by the con-fines of our imaginaries.
NOTES

1. James’s early essay “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1879), a precursor of important aspects of Pragmatism (1907), presents a thorough and strong argument supporting the idea of the suffusion of all perceptual and conceptual activities with overtones of feeling which help direct rational thinking and which may also support and establish the truth value of new insights in connecting them with their individually or collectively validated antecedents.

2. Durkheim argues against William James’s conception of religious experience as primary in a way that foreshadows aspects of Taylor’s strictures. Durkheim maintains that interpretations of religious experience, “ideas which believers have of it [i.e., religious experience],” are, more often than not, inadequate. In this way he dismisses religious experience as the inarticulate foreshadowing of later, socially relevant and socially conditioned rationalizations (Durkheim 417), as does Taylor.

WORKS CITED


