

An Open Mind: William James

Walter Lippmann

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WITHIN a week of the death of Professor William James of Harvard University, the newspapers had it that Mr. M. S. Ayer of Boston had received a message from his spirit. This news item provoked the ridicule of the people who don't believe in ghosts, but the joke was on Mr. Ayer of Boston. When, however, it was reported that Professor James himself had agreed to communicate with this world, if he could, and, in order to test the reports, had left a sealed message to be opened at a certain definite time after his death, the incredulous gasped at the professor's amazing "credulity."

William James wasn't "credulous." He was simply open-minded. Maybe the soul of man is immortal. The professors couldn't prove it wasn't, so James was willing to open his mind to evidence. He was willing to hunt for evidence, and to be convinced by it.

And in that he was simply keeping America's promise: he was actually doing what we, as a nation, proclaimed that we would do. He was tolerant; he was willing to listen to what seems preposterous, and to consider what might, though queer, be true. And he showed that this democratic attitude of mind is every bit as fruitful as the aristocratic determination to ignore new and strange-looking ideas. James was a democrat. He gave all men and all creeds, any idea, any theory, any superstition, a respectful hearing.

His interest in spiritualism is merely one illustration in a thousand. The hard scientists knew it was a hoax because they couldn't explain it, and the sentimentalists knew it was the truth because they wished it to be: but James wanted to know the facts. So he went to Mrs. Piper, and heard her out. Nay, he listened to Palladino and to Munsterberg. They pretended to know, and maybe they did.

And last year, when Frank Harris published his book on Shakespeare, to show that the "unknown" life and character of the poet could be drawn from his works, the other professors laughed the theory out of court. James went to Shakespeare and read the plays all over again to test the Harris theory. Maybe the poet could be known by his works. The fact that the theory was revolutionary did not alter the possibility that it might be true.

So with religion. A scientist, living in an age when science is dogmatically irreligious, he turned from its cocksure reasoning to ask for the facts. He went to the lives of the saints! Not to Herbert Spencer, you see. When he wanted to study the religious experience he went to the people who had had it, to Santa Theresa and Mrs. Eddy. They might know something the professors didn't know.

And again: at the age of sixty-five, with the whole of New England's individualism behind him, he asked about socialism. When he met H. G. Wells, he listened to the socialist, and, as it happens, was converted. So he said so. James was no more afraid of a new political