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The Unlimited Absorbs the Limits: Analyzing the Religious and Mystical Aspects of Virginia Woolf's Work Through the Lens of William James

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**THE UNLIMITED ABSORBS THE LIMITS: ANALYZING THE RELIGIOUS AND
MYSTICAL ASPECTS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S WORK
THROUGH THE LENS OF WILLIAM JAMES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Religious Studies

By

Zachary James Beck

May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Commentators on the work of modernist author Virginia Woolf have frequently remarked upon the “religious” and “mystical” aspects that appear throughout Woolf’s oeuvre, but have found it difficult to reconcile these aspects of Woolf’s work with her self-expressed atheistic beliefs. For those who have sought to resolve the tension between the “religious” and “mystical” features of Woolf’s work and Woolf’s (lack of) personal religious beliefs, the work of American psychologist and philosopher William James has proven to be a starting point for investigations into selections of Woolf’s oeuvre that seem to exhibit “religious” and “mystical” characteristics. There continues to exist, however, a dearth of scholarly literature pertaining to the practical application of James’s views on religion and mysticism to a careful reading of Woolf’s work. As such, this thesis illustrates not only that James’s work on religion and mysticism enables Woolf and her oeuvre to be examined with reference to notions of the “religious” and “mystical,” but that reading selections from Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* and from her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past” through the lens of James’s conceptions of religion and mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and “A Suggestion About Mysticism” allows one to see the strong correspondence between the “religious” and “mystical” features that appear in Woolf’s work and the characteristics of religion and mysticism described by James. A sense of the sacred persists in the work of the atheistic Woolf, but the religious and mystical aspects present in *To the Lighthouse* and “A Sketch of the Past” are found not in the sacrality of institutional or organized religious beliefs and practices but in the ordinary world of social community and everyday experience.

KEYWORDS: atheism, William James, literature, literature and religion, modernism, mystical experience, mysticism, religion, religious experience, Virginia Woolf

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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May any honor and praise that this thesis might merit be directed to God, to whom all glory and laud is due through Jesus Christ.

I dedicate this thesis to the loving memory of Stephen Trobisch.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Virginia Woolf, William James, and the “Religious” and “Mystical” in Their Works	Page 1
Literature Review	Page 7
A Brief Outline of This Project and Its Chapters	Page 14
Chapter 2: Secularization, Religion, and the Modernist Movement in Britain	Page 17
Religion, Sacrality, and the Modernist Period	Page 21
Virginia Woolf, William James, and the Modernist Movement: Points of Contact	Page 31
Chapter 3: Religion/Religious Experience and Mysticism/Mystical Experience in William James’s <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i> and “A Suggestion About Mysticism”	Page 35
James on “Religion” in <i>Varieties</i>	Page 36
James on “Mysticism” in <i>Varieties</i> and “A Suggestion About Mysticism”	Page 43
Conclusions Concerning James’s Conceptions of Religion and Mysticism	Page 53
Chapter 4: The “Religious” and “Mystical” Aspects of Virginia Woolf’s <i>To the Lighthouse</i> and “A Sketch of the Past”	Page 58
<i>To the Lighthouse</i> , Mrs. Ramsay, and the Move Toward the Mystical	Page 59
The Mystical Experience of Mrs. Ramsay in Chapter 17 of <i>To the Lighthouse</i>	Page 65
Mrs. Ramsay and the Sacrality of Social Community	Page 70
The Mystical Nature of Woolf’s “Moments of Being”	Page 75
Chapter 5: James, Woolf, Religion, and Beyond	Page 87
Bibliography	Page 95

CHAPTER 1: VIRGINIA WOOLF, WILLIAM JAMES, AND THE “RELIGIOUS” AND “MYSTICAL” IN THEIR WORKS

Commentators on the work of early-to-mid-twentieth-century British author Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)¹ have often noted the “mystical quality” of Woolf’s writings, while simultaneously acknowledging that using the term “mystical” to describe Woolf’s writings is potentially problematic for multiple reasons.² First, Woolf was the daughter of Leslie Stephen, one of the most famous agnostics in late-nineteenth-century Britain.³ Second, Woolf herself was an avowed atheist and maintained a thoroughgoing skepticism toward religious matters throughout her life,⁴ as perhaps most famously evidenced by a remark she made in a letter written to her sister, Vanessa Bell, following T.S. Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism: “I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more creditable than he is. I mean, there is something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God.”⁵ Third, the two aforementioned points being the case, it seems somewhat paradoxical to think it appropriate to use “mystical,” a term grounded in the world of religion

¹ Woolf’s first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published in 1915, and her last novel, *Between the Acts*, was published after her death in 1941. Woolf wrote various other novels, short stories, and nonfictional works throughout the 1920s and 1930s, some of which were published during her lifetime and some of which were published posthumously.

² Stephanie Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience in Marguerite d’Oingt and Virginia Woolf,” *Comparative Literature* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 249.

³ Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 249.

⁴ Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 139; Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 249.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 457-58.

and saturated with religious connotation, to describe the writings of a person who once bluntly stated in a letter to a friend, “Oh how I loathe religion.”⁶ Yet, scholars continue to speak of certain parts of Woolf’s fictional and nonfictional work with recourse to the “mystical.”

Is there help for such a conundrum? The answer may be found by asking further questions. What if, for instance, theorists of religion could develop definitions of the mystical and of mystical experience that succeed in encompassing mysticism in all its forms, including those forms that are associated with institutional religion and those that are not quite so? What if a theorist of religion had already developed such a definition of the mystical and of mystical experience by the time Woolf began producing her work? In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, American psychologist and philosopher William James provided a view of mysticism that involved “a broad typology” that sought “to transcend doctrinal boundaries.”⁷ James’s work on mysticism and mystical experience, therefore, has been used by scholars of Woolf to examine Woolf and her oeuvre “under the category of mysticism broadly construed.”⁸ More work in this area remains to be done, however, particularly in terms of applying James’s conceptions of mysticism and mystical experience to a careful reading of Woolf’s work. As I will illustrate, not only does James’s work on mysticism enable Woolf and her oeuvre to be examined under the category of mysticism, but a practical application of James’s remarks about mysticism to selections of Woolf’s writings enables one to see the strong

⁶ This quote is found in a letter that Woolf wrote to Ethel Smyth on 29 July 1934. See Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5, eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 319. In this instance, Woolf seems to equate “religion” with “Christianity,” writing elsewhere in the letter, “You would get longer livelier and more frequent [*sic*] letters from me, if it weren’t for the Christian religion. How that bell tolling at the end of the garden, dum dum, dum dum, annoys me! Why is Christianity so insistent and so sad? Thats [*sic*] you see, why I dont [*sic*] write page after page: because I lay it down to you, this bell ringing religion.”

⁷ Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 251.

⁸ Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 251.

correspondence that exists between the “mystical” moments that appear in Woolf’s work and the “mystical” states described by James.

Nonetheless, those scholars who have written on Virginia Woolf, the “mystical qualities” evident in certain parts of her work, and the importance of William James and his conception of mysticism (in relation to the mystical features that appear in Woolf’s writing) provide a necessary foundation for my current project and the claims that I make here. I will address the following questions: What does it mean to speak of the “mystical” aspects of Woolf’s writing, and what are the characteristics of the mystical features present in sections of Woolf’s work? Can James’s ideas about and descriptions of mysticism and mystical experience, taken within the framework of his views of religion and religious experience, be effective in analyzing parts of Woolf’s work? If so, in what ways are James’s ideas about and descriptions of mysticism and mystical experience capable of illuminating aspects of Woolf’s writing, and what further insights can be had as a result? Finally, what do such illuminations and insights contribute to a study of the mystical tendencies illustrated in Woolf’s work?

By attending to these questions, I will explore the degree to which the traditionally religious concept of mysticism and mystical experience is evident in two of Woolf’s works: her novel *To the Lighthouse* and her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past.” I will examine sections of these two literary pieces specifically through the lens of James’s descriptions of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience, as explained in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and his essay “A Suggestion About Mysticism.” I will argue that aspects of Woolf’s work can be usefully analyzed using categories of thought that can be characterized as “religious” and/or “mystical” in James’s conceptions of these terms. I will *not* argue that undertaking an analysis of selections of Woolf’s work via the lens of James’s descriptions of

religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience leads to the conclusion that Woolf was “secretly religious” or that her work should be seen as undergirded by some sort of subconscious religious system or belief. Rather, I will argue that applying James’s ideas about religion and mysticism to an investigation of selections from Woolf’s fictional novel *To the Lighthouse* and her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past” enables one to garner an otherwise unrecognized perspective on Woolf’s writing — a perspective that seeks to confirm the “religious” and “mystical” aspects of Woolf’s writing while simultaneously recognizing Woolf’s nonreligious, atheistic beliefs — and, in doing so, to plunge deeper into Woolf’s work in a manner that has not been explored as intensely as it might. In making such arguments, I aim to contribute to the body of research that has sought to unite two major strands of scholarship on Woolf and her work. The first of these strands focuses on the “mystical” aspects of Woolf’s work, while the second focuses on the importance of the “ordinary” and “everyday” elements of Woolf’s oeuvre. To achieve this goal, I will examine selections from *To the Lighthouse* and “A Sketch of the Past” in order to illustrate that the ordinary and everyday is the catalyst for the mystical aspects of these works. I will draw on James’s conceptions of and ideas concerning mysticism and mystical experience as a framework within which to discuss how the term “mystical” can be defined and, thus, how an experience denoted by the term can be analyzed.

When I refer to the “ordinary” and “everyday” elements that Woolf stresses in much of her work, I intend to use these terms in a specific way. By the “ordinary” and “everyday,” I mean “the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames [one’s] forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds,”⁹ including those events, objects, and settings that suggest “ideas

⁹ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 77. I use this definition provided by Felski while also noting that the very idea of the “everyday” is, according to Felski, “the most self-evident, yet the most puzzling of ideas” and that “everyday life seems to be

of familiarity, routine, custom, and habit.”¹⁰ Woolf’s writings tackle the “pedestrian world” with its “prosaic subjects,”¹¹ its “habitual things” and “unselfconscious routines,”¹² but it is precisely these ordinary worlds and subjects, these everyday things and routines that lead to moments of transcendence and ecstasy in Woolf’s work, moments that can be classified as “mystical,” by James’s conception of the term. Mystical experiences, as described by James, can be summarized as “experiences of *powerful, transformative, personally interpreted contacts with transnatural realities.*”¹³ James notes that such experiences are characterized by four specific “marks”: ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity.¹⁴ Given that Woolf lived and worked in a cultural era marked by religious crises,¹⁵ that she was a self-proclaimed atheist, and that mysticism is a concept firmly associated with religious tendencies and traditions,¹⁶ it is important to note that James’s views of mystical experience allow him to categorize certain experiences as “mystical,” but *not* as necessarily “religious.” As William G. Barnard explains, “James had a unique conception of what should or should not be designated as ‘mystical.’ . . . James saw ‘mystical experiences’ as encompassing a broad fluid spectrum of mental states. . . . From James’s perspective, while certain mystical experiences are ‘religious,’ other mystical experiences are not.”¹⁷ Hence, “[T]he category of ‘mystical experience’ for James is actually in

everywhere yet nowhere. Because it has no clear boundaries, it is difficult to identify” (*Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, 77-78).

¹⁰ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 8.

¹¹ Liesl M. Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 42.

¹² Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” 50.

¹³ William G. Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 17. For further discussion of this definition and further description of each of the terms used in it, see chapter 3.

¹⁴ See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 290-92. Again, I will discuss each of these marks in greater depth in chapter 3.

¹⁵ I describe the cultural setting in which Woolf lived and worked in the following chapter.

¹⁶ James’s discussion of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* takes place within the context of his perspective on religion and religious experience.

¹⁷ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 12.

some ways *wider* and *more* inclusive than the category of ‘religious experience’ — not the reverse.”¹⁸ Such a point enables me to argue that Woolf’s work can be productively analyzed using James’s conceptions of mystical experience, while simultaneously recognizing that Woolf was, by her own admission, atheistic and neither traditionally nor untraditionally “religious.”

Despite Woolf’s nonreligion, the work I undertake in this project can be seen as contributing to the field of research known as literature and religion. In her description of the discipline of literature and religion, Susan M. Felch notes that literature and religion is a broad, widely defined area of study: “There appear to be few boundaries in the landscape inscribed by literature and religion; so long as a critic can demarcate a text, an author, or a methodology as having literary and religious concerns or, converting absence into presence, as resisting literary and religious interests, she is welcome to join the conversation.”¹⁹ Explaining further, Felch states that scholarship on literature and religion encompasses religious and/or theological readings of literary texts, literary readings of sacred texts, and expositions of the ways in which religious cultures have influenced texts and their authors.²⁰ Such concerns are related to fundamental questions in the discipline of literature and religion, including those that probe the extent to which literature relates to religion and the role that literary studies play in contemporary reflections upon religion.²¹ Scholars studying Woolf and her writings have explored these types of topics, and the work of some of these scholars must be noted in order to indicate the value of previous scholarship on these subjects, as well as to clarify the value of my current study.

¹⁸ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 12.

¹⁹ Susan M. Felch, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*, ed. Susan M. Felch (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2.

²⁰ Felch, “Introduction,” 3.

²¹ Gregory C. Stallings, Manuel Asensi, and Carl Good, “Introduction,” in *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, eds. Gregory C. Stallings, Manuel Asensi, and Carl Good (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 2.

Literature Review

When surveying the history of scholarship on Woolf's work, one consistently notes the ways in which scholars of Woolf seek to approach and account for the "religious," "spiritual," and/or "mystical" qualities of Woolf's writing, and questions concerning these qualities have been broached by a number of authors over the last several decades and considered through various matrices. Among the older works focused specifically on the "spiritual" aspects of Woolf's writing is Morris Beja's 1971 *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. Beja analyzes Woolf's fiction (as well as the fiction of modernist authors James Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner) with particular focus on the concept of "epiphany," which he defines as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phrase of the mind — the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it."²² Despite his failure to thoroughly explain what he means by "spiritual," Beja illustrates that epiphanic moments play a key role in Woolf's fiction, especially in her novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, often by working as a structural tool, by marking climaxes in the narrative, and by functioning as an integrating device, bringing together disparate threads of the narrative.

Epiphanic moments, Beja further contends, "seem to be what might be called 'secular mystical experiences,' in which a person feels the sensations but not the convictions of the mystic."²³ Thus, Beja argues that Woolf's use of epiphany played a significant role in her fiction, so much so that it became a characteristic part of her work, both as a literary device and as an insight into the spiritual nature of her "moments of vision."²⁴ Beja's study of the relationship

²² Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), 18.

²³ Beja, *Epiphany*, 123.

²⁴ Beja, *Epiphany*, 126.

between Woolf's work and the concept of epiphany is insightful, but his failure to discuss in more detail the root of the epiphanies that occur in Woolf's work — what events or objects lead to and provide the basis for such epiphanies? — leaves an important issue unaddressed.

The more specific matter of how a reader might interpret the relationship between Woolf's atheism and the mystical qualities of her writing (an issue largely outside the purview of *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*) was taken up in the 1980s by others, including Martin Corner and Mark Hussey. In a 1981 article, "Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*," Corner claims that Woolf was, without question, both an atheist and a mystic, and that her atheism and mysticism must be considered together in order to understand either.²⁵ Corner focuses in his article on the experiences of two of Woolf's most famous characters — Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, protagonists of *To the Lighthouse* — outlining the differences in each character's mystical experiences in the novel. In doing so, Corner differentiates between what he calls "introvertive" mystical experiences, in which one turns inward to the pure self, and "extravertive" mystical experiences, in which one turns outward to the world. Correspondingly, Corner outlines distinctions between moments of "fusing" in Woolf's fiction, moments in which "the self blends into unity with something else, a single object or the world as a whole,"²⁶ and moments of "facing," in which one has a mystical encounter with "something 'out there,' apart from [oneself]."²⁷ Corner proposes that, as illustrated by the experiences of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, *To the Lighthouse* includes examples of both introvertive, fusing mystical experiences and extravertive, facing mystical experiences. Corner concludes, therefore, that

²⁵ Indeed, the opening sentence of Corner's article reads, "Virginia Woolf was an atheist; she was also a mystic" (Martin Corner, "Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*," *Studies in the Novel* 13, no. 4 [Winter 1981]: 408).

²⁶ Corner, "Mysticism and Atheism," 410.

²⁷ Corner, "Mysticism and Atheism," 413.

Woolf's mystical qualities, as illustrated in *To the Lighthouse*, remain rooted in her atheistic beliefs but reveal the world to be "ordinary and yet miraculous."²⁸

Analyzing the philosophical dimensions of Woolf's fiction in his 1986 *The Singing of the Real World*, Mark Hussey explores Woolf's ideas pertaining to the self and personal identity, which, he contends, lead a reader "to realize that [Woolf's] concept of the essential nature of human being [*sic*] was religious *in character*. Although an ardent atheist, Woolf gradually came to hold what can best be described as a faith, the essential element of which was belief in a 'soul.'"²⁹ Clarifying his discussion of the "self" and the "soul," Hussey proposes that the terms "self" and "soul" "were synonymous for Woolf. The self, or soul, is an 'essence' apart from all identities (apparitions) that cannot issue in the world but that may survive even after death."³⁰ As such, Hussey sees Woolf's fiction as underlain with concerns of the numinous, ideas of reality, and the yearning to transcend the world of time and death. Woolf's body of work thus illustrates her vacillation between faith in a meaningful world and her sense of life's absurdity. Yet, Hussey asserts (wrongly, I contend) that Woolf's philosophy, as manifested in her fiction, stands distinct from any sort of mystical underpinnings. Although Hussey does not clarify what he means when he speaks of "mysticism" and/or the "mystic[al]," he proposes that Woolf's concept of reality "is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in lived experience"³¹ and that Woolf "was certainly no mystic escaping the world through contemplation."³² I agree that Woolf's mysticism did not lead her to seek to escape the world through contemplation, but I argue that such a characterization of mysticism and/or mystical experience lacks subtlety. As I illustrate in the

²⁸ Corner, "Mysticism and Atheism," 423.

²⁹ Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), xv.

³⁰ Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, xix.

³¹ Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 97.

³² Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 31.

following chapters, William James's conceptions of mysticism and his discussions of mystical experience provide a substantive view of mysticism and mystical experience and allow Woolf, her lived experience, and her work to be analyzed with relation to these subjects.

In the 1990s, important articles concerning Woolf's mysticism were published by Julie Kane and Stephanie Paulsell, both of whom sought to compare Woolf's mysticism to that of other groups and individuals. In "Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf," Kane "explore[s] the parallels between Woolf's 'natural mysticism' and teachings of Theosophy," which sought to fill "the spiritual void left in the wake of Darwinism with non-Christian, non-deistic, humanistic, yet 'religious' teaching."³³ Kane argues that the experiences of various characters in Woolf's novels — including characters in *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *Between the Acts* — share similarities with concepts associated with the Theosophical movement, including the idea of auras, of synesthetic perception, and of astral travel. At the same time, Kane acknowledges that the characteristics of traditional mystical experiences — such as the "loss of self; [the] merg[ing] with a greater unity; the apprehension of numinousness, timelessness, transcendence, and intensified meaning"³⁴ — are also recognizable in Woolf's writings. I will explore some of these characteristics below via James's remarks on the major features of mystical experience as described in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Stephanie Paulsell's "Writing and Mystical Experience in Marguerite d'Oingt and Virginia Woolf" also provides a comparative study of the mystical tendencies of Woolf's writing. Paulsell argues that "mystical experience and the act of writing are often interrelated in the writings of . . . medieval women mystics and in the work of Virginia Woolf."³⁵ Paulsell thus

³³ Julie Kane, "Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 329.

³⁴ Kane, "Varieties of Mystical Experience," 332.

³⁵ Paulsell, "Writing and Mystical Experience," 250.

aims to demonstrate the relationship between mystical experience and writing in the work of thirteenth-century mystic Marguerite d'Oingt and in Woolf's work. Concerning Woolf, Paulsell focuses specifically on "A Sketch of the Past." In her analysis of the type of mysticism exhibited in "A Sketch of the Past," Paulsell refers to James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and uses James to assert the legitimacy of analyzing Woolf's work under the category of mysticism. Further, Paulsell draws significant connections between Woolf's mystical experiences and the act of writing. As Paulsell states, "The act of writing is the chief discipline of Woolf's 'philosophy' because, through writing, she can order and examine her moments of being, moments which, when so ordered, reveal the truth about life."³⁶ I address the role that writing played in the mystical nature of Woolf's "moments of being" in the final chapter of this study.

Recent surveys of Woolf's fiction that have given noteworthy attention to the mystical impulses evident in her novels include Pericles Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (2010), Lorraine Sim's *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (2010), and Donna J. Lazenby's *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch* (2014). Lewis's main objective in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* is to highlight the ways in which the literary work of Woolf (and four other modernist novelists) "sought to provide replacements for religion in the wake of a God whose announced withdrawal from this world never seemed to be quite complete."³⁷ Situating Woolf and her contemporaries in their early-twentieth-century context — that is, in a world in which religious belief came to be questioned and the forces of secularization became increasingly

³⁶ Paulsell, "Writing and Mystical Experience," 264.

³⁷ Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1. The four other novelists Lewis considers in his study are Henry James, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Franz Kafka.

influential among certain societal groups — Lewis claims that the work of many modernist writers aimed to locate and describe forms of sacrality and transcendence “in this world, without reference to the supernatural.”³⁸ I discuss this point in greater detail in the following chapter and draw substantially on Lewis’s claims. Also notable is that Lewis refers to the broadness of James’s definition of “religious experience,”³⁹ particularly as outlined in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, when discussing religion in literary modernism, a matter that demands attention in a discussion of Woolf’s mysticism and that I address in chapter 3.

Sim’s monograph explores the ways in which ordinary and everyday forms of experience provide insight into the thematic concerns of Woolf’s fiction, including the manner by which, for Woolf, “a secular form of spirituality and the sacred stemmed from, or was intimately connected to, the ordinary, material world.”⁴⁰ Sim highlights the connections between Woolf’s “moments of being,”⁴¹ her atheism, and ordinary experience, arguing that these various aspects of Woolf’s life and thought were integral to her artistic output. Woolf’s fictional and nonfictional work, Sim contends, illustrates that Woolf found the everyday world to be not only “mundane and familiar” but also to be a source of the “extraordinary and ecstatic.”⁴² The result of this dual mode of apprehending the world — as both familiar and extraordinary at the same time — is a body of artistic work that demonstrates Woolf’s “apprehension of a numinous reality apart from the empirical world, what she calls the ‘real thing behind appearances.’”⁴³

³⁸ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 21.

³⁹ As Philip Tsang points out in his review of Lewis’s monograph, however, Lewis himself never explicitly states what he means by the term “religious experience” and sometimes seems to conflate “religious” with “supernatural.” See Philip Tsang, review of *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* by Pericles Lewis, *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 193-95.

⁴⁰ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 139.

⁴¹ See chapter 4 for my examination of the experiences Woolf termed “moments of being.”

⁴² Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 13.

⁴³ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 155.

Lazenby's *A Mystical Philosophy* likewise gives significant attention to the connections between the ordinary and the extraordinary in Woolf's fiction, and similarly to Sim, Lazenby identifies everyday life as the source of revelation in Woolf's work. Lazenby seeks to readdress the question of Woolf's mysticism by highlighting what she considers the inadequacies of recent critical studies of the mystical in Woolf's work, particularly by redefining what it means to speak of Woolf's mysticism.⁴⁴ In this way, Lazenby engages Woolf's work with traditional mystical perspectives, specifically those of Plotinus⁴⁵ and Pseudo-Dionysius.⁴⁶ Lazenby thus uses the work of Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius to examine the apophatic⁴⁷ and cataphatic⁴⁸ dimensions of the mysticism illustrated in Woolf's work. Bringing Woolf and her work into conversation with "more traditionally sourced mystical traditions," Lazenby contends, allows one "to engage not only with a different kind of mysticism than that which [Woolf's] contemporaries recognized — that is, with literatures supporting a *religious* tradition — but with a perspective which critic, acknowledging her atheism, have not assumed worth attempting."⁴⁹ Lazenby's work illustrates

⁴⁴ "Woolf's critics," Lazenby claims, "have often been hostile to 'mystical' interpretations of her work" because of "prevalent misapprehensions of mysticism," which Lazenby aims to rectify. For examples of specific misapprehensions Lazenby identifies, see Donna J. Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3.

⁴⁵ See especially Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 71-124.

⁴⁶ See especially Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 181-85.

⁴⁷ Lazenby writes specifically on apophaticism in Western Christian mysticism. She draws on Denys Turner's definition of apophaticism in Turner's *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*: "'Apophaticism' is the name of that theology which is done against the background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of theology in the light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, that 'we do not know what kind of being God is' . . . [and] is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*, 'the negative way'" (Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 20, quoted in Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 8-9). For Lazenby's exploration of the apophatic dimension of Woolf's work, see *A Mystical Philosophy*, 180-212.

⁴⁸ Lazenby again focuses on cataphaticism in the mystical traditions of Western Christianity and again references Turner's definition of the term: "The 'cataphatic' is . . . 'the verbose element in theology, it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can. . . . It is its cataphatic tendencies which account for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of being linguistically *overburdened* (Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 20, quoted in Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 9). For Lazenby's treatment of what she sees as the cataphatic dimension of Woolf's work, see *A Mystical Philosophy*, 71-128.

⁴⁹ Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 45.

the insights that can be gained by comparing Woolf's mysticism to mystical traditions intimately associated with religion and draws attention to the ways in which Woolf and her work, although rooted in atheism, contribute to the conversation about mysticism and the mystical impulse.

A Brief Outline of This Project and Its Chapters

In the following chapters, I will draw upon and interact with the aforementioned scholars and their works — as well as the work of other scholars — in order to make and defend my arguments concerning the mystical qualities evident in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and "A Sketch of the Past." As I do so, I will also refer to scholarly works relating to William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James's *Varieties* (as I will henceforth often abbreviate the full title of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) is crucial to my current project. Not only can the descriptions of mysticism that James provides in it be applied to certain parts of *To the Lighthouse* and "A Sketch of the Past" in order to reveal new ways of understanding and interpreting the work that Woolf does in these writings, but James's study of mysticism in *Varieties* is also recognized as a seminal work on the subject of mysticism generally. If James is "one of the founding fathers of the academic study of mysticism" and if *Varieties* is "by far the most important source for gaining an understanding of James's views on mysticism,"⁵⁰ then it is important that one who proposes to investigate the mysticism of Woolf's writings should take into account the ideas about mysticism that James proposes in *Varieties*. Furthermore, if the "major thesis" of *Varieties* is that "the basis of religion, including . . . personal religious feelings and beliefs, is rooted in religious experiences of a mystical sort,"⁵¹ it is likewise important to

⁵⁰ Both claims of which are made by Barnard (*Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 1).

⁵¹ A claim made by in Richard Gale, *The Philosophy of William James: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 184.

explore the ways in which James's conceptions of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience connect and converse with Woolf's atheism. Embarking on such an exploration enables one to expand one's awareness of the value of James's work and to gain deeper insight into Woolf's writing. In doing so, it calls into question the usefulness of the traditional religious-nonreligious dichotomy.

As I argue that aspects of Woolf's work can be analyzed using categories of thought that can be characterized as "religious" and/or "mystical" in James's conceptions and definitions of the terms, my study will proceed as follows. Chapter 2 will focus on describing the social and cultural world in which Woolf lived and wrote. Woolf lived in what is known today as the modernist era, and her work is part of the literary movement known today as modernism. My discussion of the modernist era will concentrate on the entanglements that existed during the period between institutional religious belief and the growing influence of secularization in society. My discussion of modernist literature (with a specific focus on Woolf's oeuvre) will similarly attend to the ways in which modernist authors who abandoned institutional religious belief nonetheless continued to express and represent a sense of the sacred in their works.

Chapter 3 investigates James's views of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience, as described in *Varieties* and "A Suggestion About Mysticism." By providing a detailed analysis of how James conceptualizes and delineates religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience in *Varieties* and "A Suggestion About Mysticism," I will demonstrate that James's understandings of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience allow a wide range of beliefs and experiences to be considered religious and/or mystical, including those that are divorced from any sort of institutional and/or organized religious beliefs, practices, or contexts. As such, I will contend that one can analyze

Woolf's work via the lens of James's ideas about religion and mysticism, even though Woolf herself was a nonreligious atheist.

In Chapter 4, I delve into two specific selections from Woolf's oeuvre: chapter 17 of the novel *To the Lighthouse* and her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past." As I analyze these two selections, I will illustrate that applying James's ideas about religion and mysticism to a close reading of these works enables one to garner an otherwise unrecognized perspective on Woolf's writing and to plunge deeper into Woolf's work in a manner that seeks to more fully understand the sense of the sacred that persists in Woolf's writing. In doing so, I will contend that the religious and mystical aspects in *To the Lighthouse* and "A Sketch of the Past" are rooted not in the sacrality of institutional religious beliefs and practices related to the supernatural, but in everyday experience and the ordinary world. I will provide concluding remarks concerning my study in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2: SECULARIZATION, RELIGION, AND THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT IN BRITAIN

Before I turn my attention to an examination of William James’s conceptions of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience and the ways in which Virginia Woolf’s writing relates to such conceptions, it is first necessary to provide an overview of the cultural setting in which Woolf lived and wrote, particularly in terms of the ways that cultural era perceived and conceived religious ideas. Woolf grew up and pursued her literary career in Britain in what is now known as the “modernist era” (also known as the “modernist period” or “modernist age”). A defining characteristic of the modernist period was the emergence and development of an artistic and philosophical movement known simply as “modernism.” Issues concerning the definition of modernism, the extent to which modernism as a movement can be seen as a cohesive entity, and how the modernist era emerged in Britain from the preceding Victorian and Edwardian periods are beyond the purview of the current project.⁵² A few general points about the modernist movement in Britain, however, are worth noting, for when I speak of “modernism,” the “modernist period” (or “modernist era” or “modernist age”), and “modernist thought” in this chapter, I am using the terms “modernism” and “modernist” with specific regard to the modernism with which Woolf would have been immersed — namely, the modernism of early-to-mid-twentieth-century Britain. Although scholars find it difficult, if not impossible, to

⁵² Issues such as these are also not directly relevant to the questions I pursue or the arguments I make in this project. For starting points for discussions of matters mentioned here, see Peter Childs, *Modernist Literature: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1-48; Kevin J.H. Dettmar, “Introduction,” in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, eds. David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 1-5; and Rachel Potter, *Modernist Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1-6. For an overview of the ways in which various conceptions and definitions of modernism relate specifically to Woolf’s work, see Michael H. Whitworth, “Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Modernity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, 2nd ed., ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 107-23.

precisely mark the beginning of the modernist movement,⁵³ there is a general scholarly consensus that modernism as it is now known emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century — that is, somewhere between 1875 and 1920.⁵⁴ Having been born in 1882 and having published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1915, Woolf's life and work were doubtlessly influenced by the social and cultural changes that characterized the modernist movement.⁵⁵ Chief among these changes were those that related to questions concerning the relationship between secularization and religion in public and private realms.

Because scholarship on the modernist period and the literature produced during the period frequently refers to the ways in which modernist writers related to the growing secularization of the early twentieth century,⁵⁶ it is necessary for me to clarify what I mean when

⁵³ A point made by Michael Levenson: "Any history, especially a history of Modernism, must begin with the myth of origins. Was there a first modernist? Even to pose the question is to hear the sound of folly. . . . To try to identify an elusive beginning [to modernism] or to propose clinching definitions [of modernism] is to play a game with changing rules" (Michael Levenson, *Modernism* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011], 1).

⁵⁴ Levenson states that modernism has its roots in "the last half, and especially the last quarter, of the nineteenth century" and cites the 1880s as a decade of particular importance for the development of modernism (*Modernism*, 3). Following Levenson, Jorge Sacido claims that "we can place the genesis of English modernism . . . around 1890" (Jorge Sacido, *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English* [Amsterdam: Brill, 2012], 3). Jane Dowson notes that "[m]odernism's inauguration is cited variously between 1890 and 1919," choosing 1910 as the starting point for her work on modernist female poets in Britain (Jane Dowson, *Women, Modernism and British Poetry, 1910-1939: Resisting Femininity* [London: Routledge, 2016], 2).

⁵⁵ As Woolf herself notes in a 1924 essay entitled "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown", "[O]n or about December, 1910, human character changed. . . . All human relationships have shifted — those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Virginia Woolf Reader*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska [San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984], 194).

⁵⁶ A full description of the characteristics of literary modernism — that is, of the literature produced during the modernist period — is not essential to the points I make here. For further discussion of the styles and attributes of what is now known as literary modernism, see Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (New York: Penguin, 1991), 19-56; Mary Ann Gillies and Aurelea Mahood, *Modernist Literature: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1-21; and Potter, *Modernist Literature*, 7-36. For concise examinations of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as modernist literature, see Pamela L. Caughie, "Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse*," in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, eds. David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 486-98; and Janis M. Paul, "Teaching *To the Lighthouse* as a Traditional Novel," in *Approaches to Teaching Woolf's To the Lighthouse*, eds. Beth Rigel Daugherty and Mary Beth Pringle (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2001), 35-40.

I speak of “secularization” with regard to modernist culture.⁵⁷ In *A Secular Age*, a seminal book on the topic of secularity and secularization, Charles Taylor outlines in his opening pages three distinct, but related, meanings of secularity. The first meaning that Taylor outlines “concentrates on the common institutions and practices — most obviously, but not only, the state,” highlighting that “whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection.”⁵⁸ In the second meaning Taylor notes that secularity “consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church.”⁵⁹ Taylor remarks that, “[i]n this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular.”⁶⁰ The third sense in which Taylor discusses secularity “consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”⁶¹

Taylor proceeds to state that he seeks in *A Secular Age* to examine society as secular in the third sense of the term, and in the current project, I largely follow his lead. I seek, however, to use the terms “secular” and “secularization” not merely to describe how modernist society was, for some of its members (including Woolf), a society in which belief in God was

⁵⁷ This is to say nothing of the issue that “secularization” has become a term that is used to denote a variety of different, if fundamentally interrelated, ideas. John C. Sommerville speaks to this point in the introduction to his book on secularization in early modern England, stating that the term “‘secularization’ has seemed such a broad, diffuse, tautological, or even contradictory concept that sociologists and historians have become impatient with it. They cannot do without the term, but they use it very gingerly. . . . [T]heir discussions [about secularization and religion] have floundered because of the lack of agreement or consistency in definitions of secularization and of religion” (James C. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992], 3-4).

⁵⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

⁶¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

challenged, at least somewhat problematic, and one belief-option among others (as outlined in Taylor's third sense of secularity). I also intend to use the terms "secular" and "secularization" to denote what Taylor outlines in his second meaning. That is, when I speak of the secularization of the modernist period, I mean to indicate that, for certain modernists (including Woolf), the modernist experience was one in which religious beliefs and practices fell off as individuals abandoned belief in (the Christian) God and institutional religion.

In speaking of secularization in the modernist period, then, I aim to highlight characteristic aspects of secularization, such as "the decay of religious institutions"; "the displacement, in matters of behavior, of religious rules and principles"; and "the decline in the proportion of their time, energy, and resources that people devote to supernatural causes."⁶² One can thus say that, as secular ways of thinking and being influenced those living in the modernist era, "the basic functions and structural conditions of society previously supplied by religion [were] increasingly replaced by a variety of other cultural forces."⁶³ Issues pertaining to the replacement of religion by other (secular) forces in public and private realms led to conflicts and entanglements between inherited beliefs and ideas and new ways of thinking about and existing in the world, all of which contributed to what has been called the modernist era's "crisis of culture."⁶⁴ Such a crisis was recognized, expressed, and addressed in the art produced during this

⁶² I have taken these characteristics of secularization from a larger list of the features of secularization provided in Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of An Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2. I should also point out, however, that the "secularization theory" has been accused by some social scientists and philosophers of oversimplifying the data pertaining to the decline of religious belief and practice in the early twentieth century and after. Lewis remarks, for instance, that "[o]pponents of the secularization theory often note that in most of the world, outside Western Europe and the elite strata of some other societies, the twentieth century witnessed a great upsurge in religious fervor, and that even in apparently secular countries a majority of people still often claim to believe in God or Heaven" (*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 28).

⁶³ Gary Gabor and Herbert De Vriese, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Secularization: Philosophy and the Prophecy of a Secular Age*, eds. Gary Gabor and Herbert De Vriese (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), ix.

⁶⁴ Bradbury and McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," 26.

era, including those writers, Woolf among them, whose works became staples of “modernist literature.”⁶⁵ I now turn my attention to the conversations between and entanglements of secularization and religion that characterized the modernist era before describing how these conversations and entanglements and the changes they engendered provided a springboard for the creation of literature that sought to address the modernist world and its crisis of culture.

Religion, Sacrality, and the Modernist Period

I have intentionally used terms such as “conversations” and “entanglements” to refer to the relationships that arose in the modernist period between secularization and religion in order to highlight the consideration that one must use when analyzing these aspects of modernism. While recognizing and describing the ways in which modernism may be described as a “more secular” and “less religious” age than the decades that preceded it, I do not wish to give the impression that I believe the modernist era to have been a period that entirely dispensed with organized religious belief in favor of secularity. Indeed, to give such an impression would be to overlook the intricacy of the relationships that existed between secularization and religion in modernist thought, hence creating an unsubtle (and misguided) view of the modernist era. Although modernist literature’s “most enduring rallying cry” was “Make it new!”, one would be

⁶⁵ I would be remiss if I did not point out that the way in which “modernist literature” is now spoken of as a sort of cohesive singular entity is a simplification and universalization of the various types of literary styles, expressions, and genres that rose to prominence in the modernist movement. As Gregory Erickson writes on the topic, “Although *modernism* was by no means a monolithic movement (modernisms is, of course, the currently preferred term) many modernist works share a doubt in absolute certainty, a conflict between unity and fragmentation, and tension between traditional and experimental forms of representation” (Gregory Erickson, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007], 9). For further discussion, see pp. 6-9 of Erickson’s study.

mistaken to assume that such an imperative to break with established ways of being and doing was heard (or minded) by most or all people living in the early twentieth century.⁶⁶

Historical accounts of the modernist period tend to emphasize the influence of the forces of secularization and, conversely, to diminish the significance of organized religion for those living during the modernist era.⁶⁷ In some respects, such accounts provide an accurate portrait of the ways in which secularization altered the perspectives and beliefs of certain elite individuals, including Woolf, as discussed further momentarily. At the same time, however, one must recognize the continued importance and influence of established religious expressions and beliefs for many people living in the modernist world.⁶⁸ As Pericles Lewis explains, “In the modernist period . . . traditional religion continued to occupy a central role for most of the population [of England]. In 1927, the year that *To the Lighthouse* was published, baptisms in the Church of England reached 66.8 percent of all live births, the highest ever.”⁶⁹ Clearly, then, to speak of modernist period as an era in which secularization overpowered traditional religious adherence, or as an era in which innovative social and religious change swept away established religious practices, is to simplify a matter of great complexity and, thus, to miss the tenuous entanglements and conversations that existed between secularization and religion, as well as between various groups of individuals and the social and intellectual worlds in which they participated.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Dettmar, “Introduction,” 2. As Dettmar points out, “Make it new!” was a phrase coined by Ezra Pound and became, in words that Dettmar ascribes to T.S. Eliot, “the very heart of modernism.”

⁶⁷ Pericles Lewis, “Religion,” in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, eds. David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 20-21.

⁶⁸ Lewis claims that, in contrast to those “elite groups” that sought to escape the confines of organized religion, “the broader culture” of the early twentieth century “remained largely — and traditionally — religious, particularly in the English-speaking world” (*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 3).

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 38.

⁷⁰ Lewis remarks that “the early twentieth century was a period not of widespread agnosticism and liberalism, but of heightened tension and conflict over the possibilities for a religious life in the modern world”

For members of certain elite intellectual social groups during the modernist era, however, the influence of secularization did entail a “total disconnection” from the beliefs associated with organized religion and established religious views.⁷¹ Among these were major modernist writers including James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf.⁷² Yet, even for these writers, breaking from established religion did not mean breaking from all notions of the “sacred” or “religious.” Although critics of modernist literature have tended to readily read into modernist works a purely secular, nonreligious point of view,⁷³ they have done so at the expense of missing the subtler aspects of modernist texts that point to the ongoing interaction between issues of faith and doubt, as well as the presence and absence of God. As Gregory Erickson notes in *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*, “Although the innovations and difficulties of modernist artistic texts have often been interpreted as a reaction to the reported death or perceived absence of God, . . . God did not disappear, but can be found inscribed and disguised within the difficulty

(*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 43). Note again Taylor’s aforementioned third sense of secularity as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others” (*A Secular Age*, 3). Consider also David Sherman’s remark concerning modernism’s relationship with religion: “Rather than reading modernism as a reckoning with the collapse of traditional theological certainties and religious values — as a panic of meaning and purpose — it can be read as the stabilizing vision of a different world, one that is all the more complex for its intense entanglements with religion” (David Sherman, “Woolf’s Secular Imaginary,” *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 4 [November 2016]: 712).

⁷¹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 39. Such a “total disconnection” falls in line with the second meaning of secularity outlined by Taylor and mentioned above. Additionally, Taylor suggests that the thinking of modernist intellectuals who severed ties with established religious belief and practice follows previous historical developments related to the (non)religious perspectives of “social elites”: “The end of the eighteenth century saw the emergence of a viable alternative to Christianity in exclusive humanism; it also saw a number of reactions against this, and the understanding of human life which produced it. This was the beginning of what I’m calling the nova effect, the steadily widening gamut of new positions — some believing, some unbelieving, some hard to classify — which have become available options for us. But all this is happening among social elites, sometimes . . . only among the intelligentsia. And this process of elite pluralization continues throughout the nineteenth century” and into the twentieth century (*A Secular Age*, 423).

⁷² Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 4. For a further discussion of the ways in which the “religious” aspects of these three writers and their works can be considered similar and distinct, see Richard Kearney, “Sacramental Imagination: Eucharists of the Ordinary Universe in the Works of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*, eds. Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo, and Jens Zimmermann (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 183-222. As mentioned in chapter 1, Woolf was an outspoken atheist throughout her life.

⁷³ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 37.

and contradictory nature of many modernist works' structures and ideologies."⁷⁴ Even if one were not to follow Erickson to the extent of agreeing with his contention that *God* can be found inscribed in modernist literature, one might find it easier to agree that *a sense of the sacred* lingers throughout literary modernism, not least of all in Woolf's oeuvre.

The main issue that arises when discussing the religious aspects and the sense of the sacred that appear in Woolf's work revolves around what it means to discuss Woolf's writing in relation to terms such as "religious" or "sacred," particularly as these terms are used as part-and-parcel of or in contradistinction to traditional religion. Lewis consistently refers to the idea of the "sacred" in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, including his discussion of Woolf and her work. The "sacred" that Lewis sees as functioning in the work of literary modernists refers to a "secular sacred," "a way of seeing aspects of human experience itself as set apart, venerable, inviolable."⁷⁵ As such, when I speak of the "sacred" in this project, I use the term in a way that encompasses Lewis's remark but that also includes additional features. When I discuss the "sacred" or "the sense of the sacred," I do not intend to denote only those aspects of human experience that are set apart and inviolable. I also intend to indicate the "fundamental realities around which [individuals'] lives are organized," realities that are "experienced as timeless" and serve as "the fixed point to which [individuals] orient [their] lives."⁷⁶ The sacred, then, as I use it in this study, can be thought of as "an object, a principle, or a concept that transcends the self" and that invokes "feelings of respect [and] reverence."⁷⁷ By using "the sacred" or "a sense of the

⁷⁴ Erickson, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*, 3.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Religious Experience in the Modernist Novel*, 30.

⁷⁶ Gordon Lynch, *On the Sacred* (London: Routledge, 2014), 26.

⁷⁷ Peter C. Hill et al., "Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 30, no. 1 (March 2000): 64.

sacred” in this way, I can speak of nonreligious writers possessing a sense of the sacred without proposing that such writers were themselves religious or adherents of any religion.⁷⁸

The question of how Woolf’s work relates to institutional religion and its beliefs and practices has nonetheless been taken up by those studying Woolf. In “‘The God of Love Is Full of Tricks’: Virginia Woolf’s Vexed Relation to the Tradition of Christianity,” Christopher J. Knight argues that “Woolf appears to have been especially suspicious of religious sentiment as it is found itself institutionally housed,”⁷⁹ while simultaneously noting “a multitude” of instances “wherein Woolf borrows from the realm of Christian symbolism, the consequence of which is to add ballast to the fiction, even as the author’s own allegiance is divided.”⁸⁰ Knight thus claims that “it is quite extraordinary that a fiction that is generally as post-religious [as Woolf’s] should repeatedly employ a language and symbolism that is identifiably religious and, more specifically, Christian,”⁸¹ leading to his conclusion that Woolf’s relation to Christianity can be seen as “a tricky, vexed question” in the way that “Woolf’s attachment to the modern, secular world, and its conceptualization, does not . . . preclude an involvement with a religious understanding.”⁸²

Other scholars have likewise noted aspects of religion embedded in Woolf’s work. Mark Gaipa, for instance, has claimed that the middle section of *To the Lighthouse*⁸³ “points out the central importance of religion in Woolf’s novel” even as it “paradoxically affirm[s]” Woolf’s

⁷⁸ As Lynch points out, forms of the sacred such as those present in modernist literature cannot be seen as “secular ‘quasi-religions’ that perpetuate long-standing forms of religious organization and behaviour but without any divine, transcendent reference point. This is too simplistic” (*On the Sacred*, 102).

⁷⁹ Christopher J. Knight, “‘The God of Love Is Full of Tricks’: Virginia Woolf’s Vexed Relation to the Tradition of Christianity,” *Religion & Literature* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 28.

⁸⁰ Knight, “‘The God of Love Is Full of Tricks,’” 34. See pp. 34-39 for Knight’s further discussion.

⁸¹ Knight, “‘The God of Love Is Full of Tricks,’” 42.

⁸² Knight, “‘The God of Love Is Full of Tricks,’” 43.

⁸³ *To the Lighthouse* is comprised of three sections: “The Window,” “Time Passes,” and “The Lighthouse.” I provide a brief description of the book and its structure in chapter 4.

“agnostic doubt.”⁸⁴ Dennis Young has noted that Woolf’s work illustrates her distrust of organized religion but “expresses a deeply mythic or religious . . . view of life.”⁸⁵ Others have similarly recognized in Woolf’s work the “possibility of a certain paradoxical kind of experience: of that which is not quite religious but which also is not entirely beyond the scope of the religious, perhaps even what could be called an experience of material spirit.”⁸⁶ In each of these cases, the point is that Woolf’s work cannot be seen as supporting any sort of institutional religious faith or as professing belief in any of the claims of organized religion, but it also cannot be seen as having no relation to organized religion or to the beliefs and practices present therein. Woolf can be counted among those modernists for whom the influences of secularization did result in a total disconnection from the beliefs of organized religion, but such a disconnection does not preclude the possibility that matters related to secularization/religion and belief/nonbelief could become manifest in the literature that Woolf and her contemporaries produced.⁸⁷

Thus, while it is important to acknowledge that the growing secularization of the modernist era did lead certain modernist writers to abandon faith in organized religion and to

⁸⁴ Mark Gaipa, “An Agnostic’s Daughter’s Apology: Materialism, Spiritualism, and Ancestry in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 26, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 3.

⁸⁵ Dennis Young, “The Mythological Element in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: Bernard’s Vision,” *Iowa Journal of Literary Studies* 7 (1986): 94. Young states that he uses the terms “mythic” and “religious” interchangeably, but he fails to explain what exactly he means by the terms themselves.

⁸⁶ Stallings, Asensi, and Good, “Introduction,” 2. Frustratingly, Stallings, Asensi, and Good never provide a concrete statement of what precisely “material spirit” is or means (in their use of the term or otherwise). The quote cited here seems to provide the clearest insight into how they conceive of the term: a paradox that is not entirely religious or nonreligious and that involves “the sacred” as a question of immanence rather than transcendence” (1).

⁸⁷ As Lewis writes in his essay on religion in modernist culture, “The interest of representing religious experience is shared by modernists with widely differing religious affiliations. . . . Even the most agnostic of modernists, like Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett, made the problem of religion central to some of their works” (“Religion,” 24-25). Richard Kearney similarly claims that, although some modernist writers (such as Proust and Woolf) “may well be apostates or atheists,” their work displays a marked interest in subjects and experiences typically related to religion, and their lack of belief could, paradoxically, give them insight into “something beyond the reach of many official religious conventions” (Richard Kearney, “Eucharistic Imaginings in Proust and Woolf,” in *Material Spirit: Religion and Literature Intranscendent*, eds. Gregory C. Stallings, Manuel Asensi, and Carl Good [New York: Fordham University Press, 2014], 32).

eschew belief in ideas espoused by organized religion, it is equally essential to observe that the works of such modernist writers continued to interact with, describe, and express sentiments, perceptions, and experiences that can be described as falling into categories of “religious,” “sacred,” or “spiritual.”⁸⁸ As these types of sentiments, perceptions, and experiences have been recognized and discussed in scholarship pertaining to Woolf, they have been described as “epiphanies” involving “sudden spiritual manifestations”;⁸⁹ as “apprehension[s] of a numinous ‘reality’”;⁹⁰ as “exploration[s] of the ineffable dimension of an indescribable reality” that “simultaneously imbues and transcends the world”;⁹¹ and as “sensuous, sometimes terrifying, transcendent experiences.”⁹² Regardless of the terminology that scholars use to characterize the aspects of Woolf’s writing that suggest that there is more to the world than its basic materiality, the key point is that Woolf expresses these aspects in her writing in a way that fundamentally refuses to fit into frameworks of binary opposites. Woolf’s writing eschews divisions between sacred and profane, religious and secular, and transcendent and immanent.⁹³

Woolf’s work therefore fits well into a trend that characterized much literary modernism — namely, the tendency of modernist writers, particularly those who had disconnected from institutional religion and abandoned organized religious beliefs, to find alternative ways of

⁸⁸ For succinct but thorough discussions of the ways in which categories of “religious,” “sacred,” and “spiritual” can be understood as distinct concepts that are nonetheless related to each other in the philosophy and sociology of religion, see Giuseppe Giordan and Enzo Pace, “Introduction: Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World,” in *Mapping Spirituality and Religion in a Postsecular World*, eds. Giuseppe Giordan and Enzo Pace (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1-8; Hill et al., “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality,” 56-72; and Ralph W. Hood, Jr., “The Relationship Between Religion and Spirituality,” in *Defining Religion: Investigating the Boundaries Between the Sacred and Secular*, eds. Arthur L. Greil and David R. Bromley (London: Jai, 2003), 241-65.

⁸⁹ Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, 18. See chapter 1 for an overview of Beja’s work on the subject of epiphany and its relation to modernist literature.

⁹⁰ Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 96.

⁹¹ Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 43, 73.

⁹² Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 262.

⁹³ Kearney, “Eucharistic Imaginings,” 12. A point made also by Lewis: “The attempts of all the modernists to describe forms of experience that would traditionally have been called ‘religious’ reflects a blurring of the lines between the sacred and the profane” (*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 20).

describing and representing the notion and experience of the sacred in a way that severed such descriptions and representations from established religious frameworks and narratives.⁹⁴ Indeed, literary modernism as a movement was defined in part by the dialectic between Christian ideas, forms, and beliefs and the secular forces of doubt and atheism,⁹⁵ and in some ways, “God’s ‘gruesome shadow’ continue[d] to haunt even those [modernist writers] who proclaim[ed] their atheism.”⁹⁶ Modernist writers thus did not see the world of the early twentieth century as a world emptied of the sacred. Instead, a sense of the sacred persisted in their experiences and perceptions, and Woolf and her contemporaries sought to understand experiences of the sacred in new ways and in light of their own beliefs about and encounters with the world and others.⁹⁷

One of the most prominent ways in which Woolf and other modernist writers expressed the sacred in their writings was by emphasizing the importance of social community and the sacrality that can be found in human communion. Social community itself, in the modernist perspective, could be seen as exemplifying and exhibiting the power once attributed to God, creating a “social supernaturalism.”⁹⁸ Pursuing the sacred in this world and without reference to a super-worldly deity, modernist writers sought to build sacred communities founded upon the private world of individuals and the interactions that individuals experienced among one another, shifting the focus of the sacred from the public arena of the church — the locus of the sacred for

⁹⁴ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 138.

⁹⁵ Erickson, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*, 9.

⁹⁶ Lewis, “Introduction,” 21. Kearney describes Woolf’s work as “carv[ing] open a space . . . beyond the traditional dichotomy between theism and atheism” (Kearney, “Sacramental Imagination,” 213).

⁹⁷ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 19. Sherman expresses a similar view, stating that the secularization of the modernist era was “not a break with a religious or ‘enchanted’ [era], not a historical rupture and renewal that makes religion obsolete, but a complex and tense knotting together of religion and non-religion, enchantment and disenchantment, across individuals, families, communities, and nations” (“Woolf’s Secular Imaginary,” 714).

⁹⁸ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 4. Lewis uses the term “social supernaturalism” as a contrast to what he calls the “natural supernaturalism” of the romantics.

organized religion — to the everyday world and the social frameworks that structure ordinary life.⁹⁹ Modernist writers therefore sought to find new ways of reconstructing sacred community outside the confines of institutional religion, and they found a promising way to do so through their focus on the sacrality that exists in everyday human community.

Such was true for and evident in the work of Woolf especially. Woolf was not christened, never showed any interest in participating in organized religion or joining the church, and made no secrets about her incomprehension of organized religion. Furthermore, Woolf does not appear to have been among those modernists who “long[ed] for some new community to replace the sacred community, now lost, of the church,”¹⁰⁰ for I have found no indication that Woolf gave any mind whatsoever the loss of church community. This is not to say that Woolf did not give any mind to the construction of social community or to the sacrality that could be found in social community. Indeed, her work often illustrates the importance of sacred community and engages in a search for sacred community.¹⁰¹ But the research that I have done has yielded no evidence that Woolf considered the sacrality of social community as she experienced it in her own life or as she wrote about it in her work to be a stand-in for the lost sacred community of the church.

Nonetheless, even if, as Woolf believed, God did not exist, and thus the possibility of entering into communion with God did not exist, individuals could still find communion among themselves, in human community outside of the church (or any similar type of traditionally religious setting).¹⁰² Such communion would be a “sacred communion” based on “the union of minds.”¹⁰³ Characteristic of this form of sacred communion was the dissolution of barriers

⁹⁹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 20-22..

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 38. Unfortunately, Lewis does not identify any specific modernist writers who he thinks fit this description.

¹⁰¹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 142-43.

¹⁰² Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 153.

¹⁰³ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 161.

between individuals (and individuals' minds),¹⁰⁴ engendering the recognition that each person is connected to others and to the world in which all people live.¹⁰⁵ The heart of the sacrality of human communion that Woolf expressed in her writing is the knowledge that all people are connected to each other, and that what is real and lasting can be found in such connections.¹⁰⁶

It is necessary to emphasize that, for Woolf, the most important and meaningful type of human communion is that found in the context of everyday life, of ordinary experience. That is, Woolf's work consistently reflects themes associated with experiences that individuals have among themselves in everyday "secular" settings and specifically *not* in environments that are traditionally "religious." Throughout Woolf's oeuvre, ordinary settings provide the backdrop for Woolf's explorations into moments in which individuals experience "transcendence"¹⁰⁷ and "ecstasy"¹⁰⁸ as they come to more fully know themselves and others, in which they experience "revelations"¹⁰⁹ about the world they inhabit. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Clarissa Dalloway's most meaningful insights and observations occur in the parlor of a home in which a party is thrown.¹¹⁰ In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the dining room of a vacation house in which a meal is eaten provides the backdrop for Woolf's climactic scene and the transcendent moments that occur in the scene, as I discuss in chapter 4 of this project.¹¹¹ In the first movement of *The Waves*

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 153, 160.

¹⁰⁵ Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 119.

¹⁰⁶ Paulsell, "Writing and Mystical Experience," 263. See chapter 4 for my analysis of the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse* for further explanation of this claim.

¹⁰⁷ A term used in relation to the goals of much modernist fiction generally in Dettmar, "Introduction," 3, and used in specific reference to the experience of characters in Woolf's fiction in Kane, "Varieties of Mystical Experience," 332; Kearney, "Eucharistic Imaginings," 12; and Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 112.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis uses this term to describe the experience of Mrs. Ramsay in the eleventh chapter of *To the Lighthouse*'s first section (*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 163).

¹⁰⁹ See Olson, "Virginia Woolf's 'Cotton Wool of Daily Life,'" 43; and Paulsell, "Writing and Mystical Experience," 254.

¹¹⁰ See Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981).

¹¹¹ For the scene in its entirety, see Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989), 82-111.

(1931), Woolf uses the setting of a nursery and the garden around it in which children learn and play as a means of exploring the process by which individuals become aware of themselves, each other, and their shared existence in the world.¹¹² It is in this way that Woolf's work transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, the immanent into the sublime, and expresses the idea that the sacred does not dwell in things related to otherworldly deities or concepts but in the finite things of everyday life.¹¹³ Woolf sought to focus her fiction on "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day"¹¹⁴ and, in doing so, paradoxically, to present a way of understanding the world as familiar and ordinary but also remarkable and ecstatic.¹¹⁵ The sacred, then, as expressed in Woolf work, can be found in everyday experience and is "intimately connected to the ordinary, material world,"¹¹⁶ including the social communities in which people live and in which they participate on a daily basis.

Virginia Woolf, William James, and the Modernist Movement: Points of Contact

To recap the major points that I have made in this chapter to this point, I first drew attention to the fact that Woolf lived in a period that is now called the modernist era and that her work is a prime example of what is known as modernist literature. I highlighted that one of the defining characteristics of the modernist era in Britain was the growth of a more secular society — that is, that belief in God was challenged in a new way in British society during the modernist era and became one belief-option among others. As this occurred, religious beliefs and practices declined as people (particularly members of the intellectual elite) abandoned belief in (the

¹¹² See Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, 2006), 4-18.

¹¹³ Kearney, "Sacramental Imagination," 206; Kearney, "Eucharistic Imaginings," 31-33.

¹¹⁴ A quote from Woolf's essay "Modern Fiction." See Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), 212.

¹¹⁵ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 13.

¹¹⁶ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 139. The ordinary, material world here providing a contrast to the extraordinary, immaterial world in which the sacred resides in traditional religious belief.

Christian) God and institutional religion. I proceeded to illustrate, however, that a sense of the sacred continued to persist among those (including Woolf) who did disconnect from belief in God and from other tenets of organized religion. I argued that this sense of the sacred was found not in the beliefs and practices of organized religion but in social community, particularly in the human communion that individuals experience in everyday life. For Woolf especially, the sense of the sacred — including its transcendent and ecstatic aspects — found artistic expression via the world of the ordinary and everyday.

The main questions that arise at this point, then, are: How does one come to an understanding of the sense of the sacred that existed for the atheistic Woolf, and how might one go about investigating and exploring the ways in which Woolf's sense of the sacred became manifested in her work? Additionally, in order to study the sacred as Woolf perceived and expressed it, is it necessary that one try to lump Woolf into categories of religious belief and experience after all? That is, even if Woolf and other modernist writers were able to unhitch the sacred from religion and from religious conceptions of the sacred as rooted in and/or related to God, can one appropriately unhitch the study of Woolf's sense of the sacred from religion and its conceptions of the sacred, or must one necessarily have recourse to categories of religious belief and experience? The answers to these questions seem in large part to depend on how one approaches notions of religious belief and experience and how one uses (or avoids using) categories that have been labelled and interpreted under the banner of the "religious."

Following such a line of thinking, it is interesting to note (as mentioned in chapter 1) that some scholars studying Woolf's oeuvre have found the work of William James helpful in making sense of the seemingly religious features that appear in Woolf's writings. Of particular note, these scholars have stressed, is James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Beja remarks, for

instance, in his study on the concept of epiphany in modernist literature that, as the concept of epiphany became increasingly important in the works of modernist writers, “philosophers [devoted] more and more attention to . . . providing for the moment of illumination new bases to replace older, theological ones that now seemed to many people insufficient or unacceptable” and cites James as especially important in “his studies of religious experience and his willingness to recognize the legitimacy of faculties beyond that of reasoning.”¹¹⁷ Paulsell similarly highlights James’s *Varieties* as a work that sought “to transcend doctrinal boundaries” and encompass aspects of religious experience in numerous forms.¹¹⁸ Lewis also spends a significant amount of time focusing on the important role that James (and *Varieties*) plays for those trying to make sense of the seemingly religious expressions evident in the work of modernist authors. Stating that “[t]he major challenge facing the developing social sciences of religion in the early twentieth century” involved the question of “how to account for the force of religious experiences that have no empirical basis other than the impressions of the individual,”¹¹⁹ Lewis refers to James as one who “offered a particularly sympathetic account of religious experience” and aimed “to reconcile scientific inquiry with religious belief.”¹²⁰ Significantly, Lewis draws attention to the way in which James’s study of religious experience and its variety of characteristics “turn[ed] away from institutions, beliefs, and dogma in order to attend to individual experience.”¹²¹

Indeed, it is precisely because James’s investigations in *Varieties* effectively downplayed the role of institutional religion and organized religious beliefs and practices in favor of emphasizing the religious experiences of individual people that his work has played and

¹¹⁷ Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, 54.

¹¹⁸ Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 251.

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 44.

¹²⁰ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 46.

¹²¹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 46.

continues to play a crucial role in the study of the seemingly religious aspects of modernist literature.¹²² By focusing on the varieties of religious experiences that individuals have in a variety of settings and in relation to a variety of belief systems, James opened a door to broader questions and considerations concerning what it could mean to say that an experience was “religious” or, to use one especially important type of religious experience, “mystical.” It is thus to an analysis of the ways that James described religious experience and mystical experience that I now turn my attention, for it is the mystical aspects of Woolf’s writing that underlie the seemingly religious aspects of her oeuvre, and it is by exploring the characteristics of the mystical experiences present in Woolf’s work that one comes to better understand Woolf’s conception of the sacred, the value that it has, and the ways in which it becomes manifest in the ordinary world of everyday life.

¹²² Taylor remarks on this subject, “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” (Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religious Today: William James Revisited* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], 4).

**CHAPTER 3: RELIGION/RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND MYSTICISM/MYSTICAL
EXPERIENCE IN WILLIAM JAMES'S *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS
EXPERIENCE* AND "A SUGGESTION ABOUT MYSTICISM"**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the social and cultural context in which British modernist writers lived and worked, focusing on the role of religion and the sense of the sacred in the modernist era in Britain and the ways in which the forces of secularization entangled with established religious beliefs and practices. I concluded the chapter by highlighting the manner in which some scholars of literary modernism who have written on the "religious" aspects of the works of certain nonreligious modernist authors have referred to William James and his views of religious experience as outlined in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in order to tackle the issue of how nonreligious modernists could represent and express in their works ideas and experiences that seem to have markedly religious characteristics.

I will thus devote this chapter to James's work on religion and mysticism. I will begin by examining James's conceptions of religion and religious experience as explained in *Varieties* and then turn my attention to an analysis of James's investigation of mysticism and mystical experience in the lectures of *Varieties* that he devotes to these subjects. In my study of James's views of mysticism and mystical experience, I will also draw upon an essay by James entitled "A Suggestion About Mysticism," in order to supplement and clarify specific points that James makes about mysticism and mystical experience in *Varieties*. The goal of this chapter is to provide an in-depth look at how James conceptualizes religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience in *Varieties* and "A Suggestion About Mysticism." I will argue that James's understandings of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience

are so broad as to allow various types of beliefs and experiences to be considered religious and/or mystical. More pointedly, I will contend that James's perspective on mystical experience allows experiences that are divorced from institutional religious beliefs to be called "mystical" and to be analyzed as such.

James on "Religion" in *Varieties*

William James was an American psychologist and philosopher who was born in 1842, died in 1910, and who has been viewed as "a bridge figure between the intellectual life and social milieu of mid-nineteenth century America and the evolving modernist movement in Europe in the early twentieth century."¹²³ James is known popularly today as the "Father of American Psychology," for his description of the world as a "big, blooming, buzzing confusion," and as the person who coined the phrase "stream of consciousness,"¹²⁴ a phrase used in the literary world to describe a style of writing that Woolf and her works epitomized.¹²⁵ Among James's most important and popular works is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a book based closely upon a series of 20 lectures (known as the Gifford Lectures) James delivered at

¹²³ Curtis W. Hart, "William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* Revisited," *Journal of Religion and Health* 47, no. 4 (December 2008): 518. I do not have space here to go into greater detail about James's life and work in general, and a full biography of James is not relevant or necessary to my argument. For a recent biography of James (and one that has been well-received), see Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006).

¹²⁴ Hart, "William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* Revisited," 520. Per James on the phrase "stream of consciousness": "Consciousness . . . does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. . . . It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described" (William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981], 233).

¹²⁵ Joanna A. Wood states, for instance, that Woolf has "long been canonized as the foremost novelist of the stream of consciousness" literary technique: "From psychology texts to critical works, when an example of stream of consciousness writing is needed, the novels of Woolf are cited and excerpted at length" (Joanna A. Wood, "Lighthouse Bodies: The Neutral Monism of Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, no. 3 [July 1994]: 485).

Edinburgh University in 1901 and 1902.¹²⁶ The subject of these lectures was “natural theology, th[e] field of study which aimed . . . to examine religious questions without resorting to the supernatural or divine intervention as explanations.”¹²⁷ *Varieties* thus contains James’s most sustained treatment of the topic of religion,¹²⁸ and James attempts in *Varieties* to outline a “science of religions” by pursuing an “empirically verifiable . . . set of descriptions and categories of what is real, authentic, and demonstrable in a person’s religious experience and self-understanding.”¹²⁹

As suggested in the title of *Varieties*, *experience* is a matter of crucial importance to James’s comments and contentions about religion and how religion might be scientifically studied. Describing his work on the Gifford Lectures in a 1900 letter, James wrote:

The problem I have set myself is a hard one: . . . to defend (against all the prejudices of my “class”) “experience” against “philosophy” as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life — I mean prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world’s meaning.¹³⁰

James’s focus on experience in his study of religion in *Varieties* goes hand-in-hand with another point of great significance for James — namely, his contention that any appropriate study of religion should focus on the acts and encounters of individual people, not on the workings of

¹²⁶ For a summary and analysis of all the lectures contained in *Varieties*, see David C. Lamberth, *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 110-45.

¹²⁷ Matthew Bradley, introduction to *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, by William James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), x.

¹²⁸ David A. Hollinger, “‘Damned for God’s Glory’: William James and the Scientific Vindication of Protestant Culture,” in *William James and a Science of Religion: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9.

¹²⁹ Hart, “William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* Revisited,” 517.

¹³⁰ William James, *The Letters of William James*, vol. 2, ed. Henry James (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 127. Lamberth expounds on this point: “By ‘philosophy’ here, James really has in mind the ‘absolute’ branch of idealism that takes thought and feeling, philosophy and experience, as inherently separated by a difference in ultimate value. On such views, what is spiritual or valuable in religion is the system of thought that is developed rather than the experiences, practical changes, or feelings that are effected [*sic*]” (*William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, 113).

religious institutions and organizations.¹³¹ James's focus on individual religious experience is essential to *Varieties*, and as such, I will begin by exploring James's second lecture in *Varieties*, "Circumscription of the Topic," in which James delineates the foundation of his views of religion and religious experience. Following an analysis of James's comments on religion and religious experience, I will turn my attention to James's later lectures on the subject of mysticism. James's comments on mysticism are rooted in his conception of religion.

James commences his circumscription of the topic of religion and religious experience by remarking upon the difficulty that seems inherent in the very act of trying to circumscribe the topic of religion. James notes that other books on the study and philosophy of religion have tried to develop a precise definition of religion and its essence, but he claims that these definitions have varied to such an extent as to make any singular definition of "religion" nearly impossible. As he writes, the "very fact that they [i.e., the definitions of religion that other books on the philosophy of religion have proposed] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name."¹³² James proceeds to argue for the appropriateness of a broad, multifaceted conception of religion, admonishing his audience to "not fall immediately into a one-sided view of ['religion']" but to "rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternatively be equally important in religion."¹³³ Continuing this line of thought, James questions the idea that "religious sentiment" can be

¹³¹ This is perhaps unsurprising, given Wayne Proudfoot's comment that "[t]he turn to [the study of] religious experience was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on . . . ecclesiastical institutions and grounding it in human experience" (Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], xiii).

¹³² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Matthew Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29.

¹³³ James, *Varieties*, 29.

conceived as one specific thing, as opposed to a collective name for many sentiments that religion may arouse, and, on the topic of “religious emotion,” likewise claims that “there is no ground for assuming a simple abstract ‘religious emotion’ to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection by itself, present in every religious experience without exception.”¹³⁴ The conclusion James draws — and a startling conclusion it may seem for proponents of the idea that “religion” must refer to one thing and not another — is that, “[a]s there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, . . . so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act.”¹³⁵

Nonetheless, recognizing the necessity of establishing his own definition of the term “religion” for the purposes of his lectures in *Varieties*, James states that “religion,” as he uses the term, means “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”¹³⁶ Of especial importance in this definition of religion is, again, the emphasis that James gives to the individual (and the individual’s feelings, acts, and experiences), as James himself explicates: “Now in these lectures I propose to ignore the institutional branch [of religion] entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible of the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple.”¹³⁷ Personal acts, feelings, and dispositions are the aspects of religion that matter most to James, the aspects that he finds most worthy of analysis in his

¹³⁴ James, *Varieties*, 29-30.

¹³⁵ James, *Varieties*, 30.

¹³⁶ James, *Varieties*, 32. Italics in original.

¹³⁷ James, *Varieties*, 31.

investigation of religion and religious experience, and he focuses on these aspects over and above matters of organized religion.¹³⁸

James's broad definition of religion (a definition that leaves out any mention of the core aspects of institutional religion, such as creeds, beliefs, or imperative ritual practices) and his insistence on the significance of the personal religion of the individual (an insistence that minimizes the attention he gives to organized religion¹³⁹) fit well with characteristics of the secular/religious entanglements of the modernist era, as discussed in the previous chapter. Organized religious practices and beliefs played no role and possessed no value in the lives of certain modernist writers, including Woolf. Had James provided a narrow, rigid definition of religion that delineated a set of beliefs and practices that must be held, expressed, and enacted, it would be difficult to argue the relevance of such a conception of religion for Woolf, who explicitly rejected these aspects of religion. Given the definition of religion that James provides in *Varieties*, however, it seems reasonable to consider how such a definition could be useful with relation to Woolf and her work. Woolf did not hold the beliefs or enact the practices of any organized religion, but she certainly felt, acted, and experienced things in her solitude — which

¹³⁸ Per James: "In the more personal branch of religion it is . . . the inner dispositions of man himself [*sic*] which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness his incompleteness. And although the favor of God, as forfeited or gained, is still an essential feature of the story, and theology plays a vital role therein, yet the acts to which this sort of religion prompts are personal and not ritual acts, the individual transacts the business by himself alone, and the ecclesiastical organization, with its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place" (*Varieties*, 31).

¹³⁹ Although James does indeed minimize the attention he gives to many aspects of organized religion (see previous note) in *Varieties*, he does not hesitate to refer to individuals who were heavily associated with or enveloped in organized and ecclesiastical religion when making points about religion and/or religious experience. James draws from the experiences and words of Christian saints (including Augustine, Ignatius Loyola, and Frances Xavier), makes reference to "founding figures" of organized religions (including the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammed), and cites the texts of organized religions (including the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Bible, and the Upanishads). This is perhaps also the place to mention that James's work on religious experience in *Varieties* has been critiqued by some commentators as indebted to aspects of organized religion — specifically, James's familiarity with Protestant Christianity. Hollinger comments, for instance: "James's ostensibly specieswide account of religious experience is deeply Protestant in structure, tone, and implicit theology. Even the categories around which *Varieties* is organized, and the order in which James describes them, have this quality. . . . James, by moving from 'healthy-mindedness' to the 'sick soul' to the 'divided self' to 'conversion' and then to 'saintliness,' follows the prescribed sequence of the evangelical Protestant conversion narrative" ("'Damned for God's Glory,'" 11).

she then expressed in her writings — and her atheism did not prevent her from communicating a recognition of a sense of the sacred in her life experiences and in the world.

But what of “the divine” in James’s definition of religion? Could an atheist “stand in relation to whatever [she] may consider the divine”? These questions carry a great deal of weight for my argument concerning the pertinence of James’s conception of religion to Woolf and her work. The first point to note is that James uses the term “the divine” — that is, he does *not* use the word “God” or the terms “the supernatural,” “the celestial,” “the heavenly,” or any other term that would suggest that religion involves a necessarily “otherworldly” element. Building on this, a second thing to note is that James’s use of the term “the divine” is calculated, deliberate, and to be interpreted generously. James states that “a chance controversy comes up over the word ‘divine,’ if we take it in the definition in too narrow a sense. There are systems of thought which the world usually calls religious, and yet which do not positively assume a God.”¹⁴⁰ Referencing Buddhism and transcendental idealism,¹⁴¹ James remarks that one must, “from an experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds ‘religions’; and accordingly when in our definition of religion we speak of the individual’s relation to ‘what he [*sic*] considers the divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete deity or not.”¹⁴² By asserting that “the divine” can be found in atheistic religions and can indicate things other than deities, James illustrates that an atheist (such as Woolf) could indeed possess and apprehend herself as standing in relation to some sort of “divine.”

¹⁴⁰ James, *Varieties*, 32-33.

¹⁴¹ As James explains: “Popularly, of course, the Buddha himself stands in place of a God; but in strictness the Buddhistic system is atheistic. Modern transcendental idealism . . . also seems to let God evaporate into abstract Ideality. Not a deity *in concreto*, not a superhuman person, but the immanent divinity in things, the essentially spiritual structure of the universe, is the object of the transcendentalist cult” (*Varieties*, 33).

¹⁴² James, *Varieties*, 34.

Having given these clarifications of his views of the divine, James next provides a description of religious experiences (that is, experiences of the divine), focusing on one characteristic that he considers to be inherent to them. This primary characteristic is *solemnity*. James explains, “There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse.”¹⁴³ Instead, it is “precisely as being *solemn* experiences” that James wishes to discuss religious experiences.¹⁴⁴ James therefore again narrows his definition of religion by claiming that the term “divine” “shall mean . . . not merely the primal and enveloping and real, for that meaning if taken without restriction might well prove too broad. The divine shall mean . . . only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.”¹⁴⁵ Elucidating further his intention when speaking of solemnity and the solemn, James remarks, “Solemnity is a hard thing to define abstractly, but certain of its marks are patent enough. A solemn state of mind is never crude or simple — it seems to contain a certain measure of its own opposite in solution. A solemn joy preserves a sort of bitter in its sweetness; a solemn sorrow is one to which we intimately consent.”¹⁴⁶ Such aspects of solemnity can be perceived as underlying James’s descriptions of mystical experience, to which I will turn my attention in a moment.

Before doing so, however, a few summarizing remarks about James’s thoughts on the topic of religion and religious experience are necessary. Religion, for James, is a “collective name” for a number of “principle[s]” and “essence[s].”¹⁴⁷ In *Varieties*, James focuses on

¹⁴³ James, *Varieties*, 37.

¹⁴⁴ James, *Varieties*, 37. Italics in original.

¹⁴⁵ James, *Varieties*, 38.

¹⁴⁶ James, *Varieties*, 45.

¹⁴⁷ Recalling James’s aforementioned comment: “The word ‘religion’ cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name” (*Varieties*, 29).

personal religious experience and largely disregards matters related to systematic theology and ecclesiastical organization. Crucial to James's conception of religion is his idea that religion is defined by the way individual people understand themselves to stand in relation to that which they consider the divine, the divine including concrete deities *and* things that are not otherworldly objects. "Religious" responses to the divine are those that may be happy or sad, but are above all solemn. Yet, despite all of these defining features and characteristics of religion and religious experiences, James recognizes that there is ultimately no perfect or complete way of conceptualizing and delimiting religion:

[D]o what we will with our defining, the truth must at last be confronted that we are dealing with a field of experience where there is not a single conception that can be sharply drawn. . . . Things are more or less divine, states of mind are more or less religious, reactions are more or less total, but the boundaries are always misty, and it is everywhere a question of amount and degree.¹⁴⁸

Still, James's views prove beneficial for providing insight into how one philosopher was grappling with the issue of religion and the question of religious experience at the turn of the twentieth century. James's approach to such matters proves additionally useful in the way that it enables a person to see how the views of a modernist atheist such as Woolf plausibly relate to matters of religion and religious experience. This is demonstrated to an even greater degree when one turns attention to James's conceptions of mysticism and mystical experience.

James on "Mysticism" in *Varieties* and "A Suggestion About Mysticism"

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of mysticism to James and to *Varieties*. James has been called "one of the founding fathers of the academic study of mysticism," with *Varieties* being "by far the most important source for gaining an understanding of James's views

¹⁴⁸ James, *Varieties*, 38.

on mysticism.”¹⁴⁹ Further, although James devotes only two lectures in *Varieties* to the subject of mysticism and mystical experience, James’s interest in mysticism pervades the entirety of *Varieties*,¹⁵⁰ and James himself describes his lectures on mysticism as the “vital” lectures from which his other lectures “get their light.”¹⁵¹ Intriguingly, however, it is essential to note that James recognized that he was not a mystic,¹⁵² although he did seem to possess a “mystical germ” and to have sporadic experiences with mystically-tinged states of consciousness.¹⁵³ Among these mystically-tinged experiences was an event that occurred while James was on holiday in the Adirondack Mountains in early July 1898. James called this event, which was influential in his composition of “the Edinburgh lectures” (i.e., the Gifford Lectures that were later collected in *Varieties*), his “Walpurgis Nacht.”¹⁵⁴ He describes the experience in a letter written to his wife a few days after its occurrence:

[Q]uite unexpectedly to me the night turned out one of the most memorable of all my memorable experiences. . . . I got into a state of spiritual alertness of the most vital description. The influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people round me, . . .

¹⁴⁹ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 1.

¹⁵⁰ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 11.

¹⁵¹ James, *Varieties*, 290. A point concurred upon by Wayne Proudfoot: “*Varieties* has too often been read with an almost exclusive focus on the chapter on mysticism. . . . But this is to truncate the book” (Wayne Proudfoot, “Pragmatism and ‘an Unseen Order’ in *Varieties*,” in *William James and a Science of Religion: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot [New York: Columbia University Press, 2004], 35).

¹⁵² James remarks from the outset of his lectures on mysticism, “Whether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness [on the subject], I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand” (*Varieties*, 290). James makes a similar statement at the beginning of his essay “A Suggestion About Mysticism”: “Most of the writings I have seen [on the subject of mysticism] have treated the subject from the outside, for I know of no one who has spoken as having the direct authority of experience in favor of his views. I also am an outsider” (William James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” in *Essays in Philosophy*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978], 157).

¹⁵³ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 5. By “mystical germ,” Barnard means “a seed of openness to mysticism that was . . . nurtured and supported” by James’s own brushes with mystical states of awareness.

¹⁵⁴ Observed “[t]hroughout Western European spheres of influence [on] the night of April 30,” Walpurgis Nacht “celebrates magic and the supernatural” and “is home to countless ghost stories and a wide variety of folk tales populated by witches, werewolves, and other supernatural beings” (John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Nacht: The Heathen Muse in European Culture, 1700-1850* [Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007], 1). See pp. 1-29 of Cooper’s study for further remarks upon the cultural and religious histories of Walpurgis Nacht. When James references the event, he seems to intend it in a more general sense and to use it as a metaphor meant to indicate the intense “spiritual” nature of his experience.

the thought of you and the children, dear Harry on the wave, the problem of the Edinburgh lectures, all fermented within me till it became a regular Walpurgis Nacht. . . . The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it; its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay; . . . and you, and my relation to you part and parcel of it all, and beaten up with it, so that memory and sensation all whirled inexplicably together; it was indeed worth coming for, and worth repeating year by year, if repetition could only procure what in its nature I suppose must be all unplanned for and unexpected. It was one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence, and I understand now what a poet is. He [*sic*] is a person who can feel the immense complexity of influences that I felt, and make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement. In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, a mere boulder of *impression*. Doubtless in more ways than one, though, things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to it.¹⁵⁵

James's projection that parts of the Gifford Lectures would be traceable to this experience bore out. Much of James's discussion of mysticism and mystical experience in *Varieties* is implicit in the description of his "Walpurgis Nacht," and the experience of that night contained all the qualities that James considered the most important marks of a mystical experience.¹⁵⁶

When James speaks of the essential elements of mysticism and mystical experience in *Varieties*, he speaks of them vis-à-vis the definition of religion and the description of religious experience he provides in his above-reviewed "Circumscription of the Topic" lecture. James makes this point clear from the outset of his lectures on mysticism, stating, "One may truly say, I think, that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness."¹⁵⁷ What does it mean, then, to discuss "mystical states of consciousness"? Recognizing that the words "'mysticism' and 'mystical' are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, without a base in either facts of logic," James aims to restrict his meaning of the term by proposing four

¹⁵⁵ James, *The Letters of William James*, 76-77. Italics in original.

¹⁵⁶ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ James, *Varieties*, 290.

marks that, when present in an experience, permits the experience to be labeled “mystical.”¹⁵⁸

These four marks fall into two camps: the two primary marks of ineffability and noetic quality, and the two secondary marks of transiency and passivity.

Ineffability, according to James, is the “handiest of marks” by which one can classify an experience as mystical.¹⁵⁹ To say that an experience is ineffable is to say that “it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.”¹⁶⁰

Mystical states, as such, “are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect.”¹⁶¹

Simultaneously, however, all mystical states have a “noetic quality.” “Although so similar to states of feeling,” James contends, mystical states “seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”¹⁶² Any state, James explains, that contains these two characteristics (i.e., ineffability and noetic quality) entitle the state to be designated as mystical, in James’s intended use of the term.

James proceeds, however, to outline two additional qualities that are less sharply marked but usually found in mystical states: transiency and passivity. Describing the transiency of the mystical state, James notes that such states “cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade

¹⁵⁸ James, *Varieties*, 290.

¹⁵⁹ James, *Varieties*, 290.

¹⁶⁰ James, *Varieties*, 290-91. James notes a similar point at a later place in the lecture: “The deliciousness of some of these [mystical] states seems to be [*sic*] beyond anything known in ordinary consciousness. It evidently involves organic sensibilities, for it is spoken of as something too extreme to be borne, and as verging on bodily pain. But it is too subtle and piercing a delight for ordinary words to denote” (*Varieties*, 314).

¹⁶¹ James, *Varieties*, 291.

¹⁶² James, *Varieties*, 291.

into the light of common day.”¹⁶³ After they fade, “their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance.”¹⁶⁴ Just as a person experiencing a mystical state will find difficulty in sustaining the state for a long period of time, so also that person will find the mystical state as a state in which she is passive.¹⁶⁵ Although one can attempt to induce a mystical state by undertaking certain “preliminary voluntary operations, . . . when the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if his [*sic*] own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he [*sic*] were grasped and held by a superior power.”¹⁶⁶ Despite the mystic’s passivity during mystical states, the states themselves leave some memory of their content with the mystic, and the mystic feels a profound sense of the importance of the states. Mystical states thus “modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence.”¹⁶⁷

For James, then, these four characteristics — ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity — “are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness peculiar enough to deserve a special name and to call for careful study,” a group which James names “the mystical group.”¹⁶⁸ Yet, the “range of mystical experience is very wide,” James proceeds to comment, indeed “much too wide” for James to sufficiently be able to cover in his lectures on the topic, and includes “phenomena which claim no special religious significance, and . . . those of which the religious pretensions are extreme.”¹⁶⁹ Such comments are a reminder that the category of

¹⁶³ James, *Varieties*, 291.

¹⁶⁴ James, *Varieties*, 291.

¹⁶⁵ “Both passivity and transience reflect the perception that the experience is not under the subject’s voluntary control” (Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 147).

¹⁶⁶ James, *Varieties*, 291.

¹⁶⁷ James, *Varieties*, 292.

¹⁶⁸ James, *Varieties*, 292.

¹⁶⁹ James, *Varieties*, 292.

mystical experience is, according to James, wider and more inclusive than the category of religious experience.¹⁷⁰ James's conception of mystical experience and the mystical state covers a broad range of cases and states, encompassing those relatively undeveloped experiences in which one feels a heightened sense of reality; those intensifications of feelings and insights that occur under the influence of drugs, alcohol, nitrous oxide, art, and nature; and those fully developed experiences in which one feels an undifferentiated unity with reality.¹⁷¹ James's primary focus in *Varieties* is on those mystical experience that occur spontaneously, rather than those that are part-and-parcel of disciplined spiritual practice.¹⁷²

Although James's discussion of mystical states and their characteristics may appear to be a definition of the mystical state — that is, it may appear that James defines mystical states as those that are marked by a combination of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity — a close reading of the lectures on mysticism in *Varieties* illustrates that James does not provide a clear-cut definition of mysticism or mystical experience. As such, in order to more fully elucidate James's ideas about mystical experience, how it can be defined, and, ultimately, how it can be applied to Woolf's work, I will follow William Barnard's analysis of what he sees as James's implicit definition of mystical experience. Barnard's analysis is particularly valuable in the way that it accurately communicates James's views on mystical experience, “conveying both the content of James's distinctive ideas, and the lingering doubts and ambiguities which James always retained about them.”¹⁷³ I provided Barnard's definition of mystical experience (as based upon James's work) in chapter 1, but I will unpack it here more fully.

¹⁷⁰ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 12.

¹⁷¹ Gale, 185. See *Varieties*, 292-304, for James's comments on these different types of mystical consciousnesses.

¹⁷² Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 16.

¹⁷³ Fred W. Hallberg, review of *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* by William Barnard, *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (January 1998): 113-17.

According to Barnard, James’s conception of mystical experiences can be defined as “experiences of *powerful, transformative, personally interpreted, contacts with transnatural realities.*”¹⁷⁴ All mystical experiences, as James describes them, must be *experiential* — that is, all mystical experiences “are first hand events; they are ‘seen,’ ‘felt,’ and ‘intuited,’ far more than they are ‘read about,’ ‘thought through,’ or ‘believed.’”¹⁷⁵ Second, mystical experiences, according to James, are *powerful* in the sense of being “intensely felt, highly charged, and profoundly significant.”¹⁷⁶ Third, James describes mystical experiences as those that are *transformative*, those that “can and should revolutionize a person (and ideally a community’s) life.”¹⁷⁷ Indeed, in James’s view, experiences (both religious or nonreligious) should be categorized as “mystical” only if they succeed in significantly reshaping a person’s worldview.¹⁷⁸ Lastly, “mystical experiences for James involve *personally interpreted contacts with transnatural realities.* . . . [M]ystical experiences are important sources of data on the existence of realms of reality or dimensions of consciousness that exceed (even while interpenetrating) our everyday ‘natural’ reality or typical waking consciousness.”¹⁷⁹ James claims, in Barnard’s view, that mystical experiences always indicate “an ‘otherness’ within the experience, even if that ‘otherness’ is understood as a deeper level of one’s own being.”¹⁸⁰ Crucially, as Barnard points out, this definition of mystical experience encompasses phenomena that are immediately related to religion and religious experience, as well as those that are entirely

¹⁷⁴ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 17.

¹⁷⁵ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 18.

¹⁷⁷ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 18.

¹⁷⁸ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 18. This is an important point to keep in mind when considering Woolf’s mystical “moments of being” in chapter 4. These moments certainly gave shape to her worldview.

¹⁷⁹ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 18.

¹⁸⁰ Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 18.

nonreligious. I will return to this point in my analysis of certain “mystical” parts of Woolf’s work in the following chapter.

The current moment provides an appropriate time to bring in further remarks made by James on mysticism and mystical experience in his essay “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” published in 1910. In this brief essay, James provides a description of his perspective on what occurs to a person’s consciousness during a mystical experience. By considering James’s remarks on the topic of mystical experience in “A Suggestion About Mysticism” before returning to James’s closing comments of his lectures on mysticism in *Varieties*, one garners a fuller appreciation of James’s conception of the effects of a mystical experience.

James begins the essay by remarking that his eponymous “suggestion about mysticism” is that “states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary ‘field of consciousness,’” in which “the extension itself would . . . consist in an immense spreading of the margin of the field, so that knowledge ordinarily transmarginal would become included, and the ordinary margin would grow more central.”¹⁸¹ To clarify this point, James supplies an analogy related to the rising and falling of an ocean’s tides. As the field of consciousness changes during a mystical state, a state is produced that is similar to what occurs when a tide goes out: “Vast tracts usually covered are then revealed to view, but nothing rises more than a few inches above the water’s bed, and great parts of the scene are submerged again whenever a wave washes over them.”¹⁸² James therefore suggests that, during a mystical experience, an expansion in one’s field of consciousness allows aspects of consciousness that are usually not accessible — those parts of one’s mental landscape that are normally covered by the tides of ordinary consciousness — to become temporarily accessible and “uncovered.” Indeed, a

¹⁸¹ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 157.

¹⁸² James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 157-58.

sense of “uncovering” is “the essence of the phenomenon” that occurs as the field of consciousness changes during a mystical experience.¹⁸³

Further explicating this hypothesis, James makes the following remarks about the field of consciousness. The field of consciousness, according to James, is

composed at all times of a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc. Yet these ingredients, which have to be named separately, are not separate, as the conscious field contains them. Its form is that of a much-at-once, in the unity of which the sensations, memories, concepts, impulses, etc., coalesce and are dissolved.¹⁸⁴

The much-at-once form of the field of consciousness thus leads to a fluidity of consciousness, as any “present field as a whole [comes] continuously out of its predecessor and [melts] into another sensation-mass passing into another sensation-mass and giving the character of a gradually changing *present* to the experience.”¹⁸⁵ A change in the field of consciousness and a spread in the margin of the field (as described in James’s aforementioned “suggestion”), however, “bring[s] a mass of subconscious memories, conceptions, emotional feelings, and perception of relation, etc., into view all at once,”¹⁸⁶ and if the change in the field of consciousness is vast enough, “while no one of the items it contains attracts our attention singly, we shall have the conditions fulfilled for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like that termed mystical.”¹⁸⁷ And what will be the characteristics of this kind of mystical consciousness? “It will be transient. . . . It will be of reality, enlargement, and illumination, possibly rapturously so. It will be of unification, for the present coalesces in it with ranges of the remote quite out of its reach under ordinary circumstances; and the sense of *relation* will be greatly enhanced.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 160.

¹⁸⁴ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 158.

¹⁸⁵ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 158. Italics in original.

¹⁸⁶ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 159.

¹⁸⁷ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 159.

¹⁸⁸ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 159. Italics in original.

Mysticism, then, as James suggests, is rooted in “very sudden and incomprehensible enlargements of the conscious field,” and these enlargements bring with them “a curious sense of cognition of real fact,” a feeling that one has opened a window and seen through to distant realities that nonetheless belong to one’s life.¹⁸⁹ Much of what James says about mysticism in *Varieties* helps to elucidate James’s comments in “A Suggestion About Mysticism.” Mystical experiences are ineffable; they are characterized by the mystic’s “inability to make articulate report [of them].”¹⁹⁰ Mystical experiences have a noetic quality, providing illumination and revelation to the mystic. Mystical experiences are transient, for the field of consciousness expands for only a short time before receding to its ordinary state, and the mystic is passive as subconscious feelings and thoughts come into view as the field of consciousness spreads. At the same time that James’s comments in *Varieties* help to clarify points in “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” his remarks on the field of consciousness in “A Suggestion About Mysticism” shed light on the concluding comments he makes in his lectures on mysticism in *Varieties*.

In the later part of his lectures on mysticism in *Varieties*, James speaks again of the noetic quality of mystical experiences, stating that “[t]he kinds of truth communicable in mystical states . . . are various. Some of them relate to this world — visions of the future, the reading of hearts, the sudden understanding of texts, the knowledge of distant events, for example, but the most important revelations are theological or metaphysical.”¹⁹¹ If one again keeps in mind James’s contention in “A Suggestion About Mysticism” that a shift in the field of consciousness of a mystical state leads to an “uncovering” of areas of consciousness ordinarily

¹⁸⁹ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 159. James makes it a point to state that he has drawn these particular descriptions of what occurs during a mystical experience from mystically-tinged states that he had experienced. See, for instance, James’s summary of his “Walpurgis Nacht” (as provided earlier in this chapter).

¹⁹⁰ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 160.

¹⁹¹ James, *Varieties*, 313. I address the metaphysical revelations that Woolf experienced in her “moments of being” in chapter 4.

inaccessible, one can imagine the possibility that various (hitherto unrecognized) truths would manifest themselves during a mystical experience. Similarly, James claims in *Varieties* that individuals “pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time from an unrest to a rest,” hence experiencing mystical states as “reconciling, unifying states.”¹⁹² Touching also upon his ideas concerning individuals’ senses of *relation* being greatly enhanced during the mystical experience (as described in “A Suggestion About Mysticism”), James claims in *Varieties* that the “overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic [*sic*] states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed.”¹⁹³ Finally, using the same metaphor as in “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” James concludes in *Varieties* that mystical states may be described as “windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world,” informing the mystic of “the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest.”¹⁹⁴ With these remarks, James proceeds to draw his lectures on mysticism to a close.

Conclusions Concerning James’s Conceptions of Religion and Mysticism

Having provided an overview of the major points of James’s conception of both religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience, I will now turn my attention to certain conclusions — both to those that James makes in his last lecture in *Varieties* (a lecture aptly entitled “Conclusions”) and to those that I make with regard to the importance of James’s

¹⁹² James, *Varieties*, 317.

¹⁹³ James, *Varieties*, 320.

¹⁹⁴ James, *Varieties*, 326.

claims in *Varieties* and “A Suggestion About Mysticism” to my upcoming analysis of Woolf’s work. As James begins (in his final lecture) to sum up the material presented in *Varieties*, he asks following questions: “Ought it to be assumed that in all men [*sic*] the mixture of religion with other elements should be identical? Ought it, indeed, to be assumed that the lives of all men [*sic*] should show identical religious elements? In other words, is the existence of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable?”¹⁹⁵ He responds immediately, “To these questions I answer ‘No’ emphatically. And my reason is that I do not see how it is possible that creatures in such different positions and with such different powers as human individuals are, should have exactly the same functions and the same duties.”¹⁹⁶ Continuing to defend his view of the appropriateness of a number of different religious elements, types, and beliefs, James returns to a brief discussion of “the divine,” claiming that the divine “can mean no single quality, [but] must mean a group of qualities.”¹⁹⁷ If, then, the divine — the heart of James’s conception of religion, the godlike thing to which individuals find themselves standing in relation — can mean no single quality, it follows that individuals may feel various ways, act in various manners, and experience various events and sensations in their various religions.

Nonetheless, seeking a common nucleus to which all religions bear testimony, James finds that there exists

a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts: —

1. An uneasiness; and
2. Its solution.
 1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that *something is wrong about us* as we naturally stand.
 2. The solution is a sense that *we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connections with the higher powers.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ James, *Varieties*, 369.

¹⁹⁶ James, *Varieties*, 369.

¹⁹⁷ James, *Varieties*, 369.

¹⁹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 384. Italics in original.

In his discussion of the second stage of each of these parts — “the stage of solution or salvation” — James states that individuals find a solution to their uneasiness when they identify their “real being with the germinal higher part of [themselves],” which they do by “*becom[ing] conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of [them], and which [they] can keep in working touch with.*”¹⁹⁹

Although James’s conception of the “more” is vague and his description of it not easy to parse,²⁰⁰ James characterizes it in a broad way and suggests that it can take many forms. James asks whether the “more” is “merely our own notion, or does it really exist? If so, in what shape does it exist? Does it act, as well as exist? And in what form should we conceive of that ‘union’ with it?”²⁰¹ James does not attempt to answer these questions, claiming that “[i]t is in answering these questions that the various theologies perform their theoretic work”; instead, he focuses on what he sees as the more important point, that all religions “agree that the ‘more’ really exists, though some of them hold it to exist in the shape of a personal god or gods, while others are satisfied to conceive it as a stream of ideal tendency embedded in the external structure of the world.”²⁰²

Whatever exactly the “more” might be — whether a personal god or otherwise — those who become conscious of it and keep in working touch with it can experience moments of

¹⁹⁹ James, *Varieties*, 385. Italics in original.

²⁰⁰ This has been pointed out most specifically by Proudfoot. As he states in one instance: “Common to all experiences he has studied, James says, is an individual’s consciousness that the higher part of himself is continuous with something ‘more’ of the same quality that is operative in the universe outside of him and with which he can effectively connect. Both ‘higher part of himself’ and ‘operative in the universe outside of him’ are ambiguous” (“Pragmaticism and ‘an Unseen Order,’” 40). And as he states in another: “Even when James is vague, as in his comment that religion is a consciousness of a ‘More’ that is operative in the universe outside the self, he chooses his words carefully and intends them to capture the matter at hand with the appropriate degree of precision” (*Religious Experience*, 157). In this second instance, Proudfoot seems to imply that James’s comments on the “more” are intentionally vague to a certain degree.

²⁰¹ James, *Varieties*, 386.

²⁰² James, *Varieties*, 386.

insight into a wider world of meaning beyond that ordinarily accessible,²⁰³ a point that reconnects with several other important points that I have already mentioned in this chapter but that are worth recapping here before moving to my discussion of the “religious” and “mystical” aspects of Virginia Woolf’s work. First, I began this chapter by focusing on James’s conception of religion and religious experience in *Varieties*, highlighting that James takes a broad view of religion and religious experience. According to James, the term “religion” cannot be reduced to any single principle or essence, but it must instead be understood as a collective name for a variety of feelings, acts, and experiences that individual people have and do in response and relation to “the divine.” In this way, James’s attention in *Varieties* is on the religion and religious experiences of individual persons, not religious organizations or institutions. Second, as I discussed, “the divine” itself does not necessarily refer to an otherworldly deity; it denotes any object that is godlike, whether a deity, celestial agent, or something otherwise seen as sacred. Hence, James’s description of the divine leaves open the possibility that a nonreligious person (such as the atheistic Woolf) could possess and understand herself as standing in relation to a sacred something that would fall under James’s category of the divine. Third, James points out that religious experiences have a certain solemnity about them and that experiences of the divine impel an individual to respond solemnly and seriously.

Moving from James’s view of religion and religious experience to concentrate on his conception of mysticism and mystical experience in *Varieties*, as well as in “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” I pointed out that religious experience, for James, is rooted and centered in mystical states of consciousness and that, although James himself was not a mystic, experiences from his own life that contained a mystical quality informed his ideas about mystical states, their

²⁰³ Proudfoot, “Pragmaticism and ‘an Unseen Order,’” 35.

characteristics, and their meaning. The mystical state, according to James, possesses four specific marks: the two primary marks of ineffability and noetic quality, as well as the two secondary marks of transiency and passivity. Recognizing that these phenomenological markers do not constitute a definition of mysticism, however, I drew attention to what William Barnard finds as James's implicit definition of mystical experiences. I then discussed James's essay "A Suggestion About Mysticism" and the ways in which James's explanation of the shifts in the field of consciousness that occur during mystical experiences helps to clarify the comments he makes concerning the four marks of the mystical state in *Varieties*, as well as his conclusions about the value and effect of mystical states for those experience them. Finally, I provided an overview of some of James's major conclusions concerning religion and religious experience, including, once again, his broad views of "the divine" and of the "more."

Although an investigation of James's perspectives on religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience is interesting in and of itself, my primary aim in this project is to analyze how James's conceptions of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience relate to the work of atheist author Virginia Woolf. In this chapter, I have shown that James's understandings of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience are broad and generous enough to permit various types of beliefs and experiences to be considered religious and/or mystical, including beliefs and experiences that have little (if anything) to do with institutional, organized religion. In the following chapter, I turn my attention specifically to two of Woolf's literary works in order to analyze the manner in which James's views of religion and mysticism can illuminate aspects of Woolf's writing in ways hitherto unexplored.

CHAPTER 4: THE “RELIGIOUS” AND “MYSTICAL” ASPECTS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF’S *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* AND “A SKETCH OF THE PAST”

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, critics of and commentators on the fictional and nonfictional writings of Virginia Woolf have noted what has been described as the “spiritual,” “mystical,” and “religious” aspects that appear throughout Woolf’s oeuvre.²⁰⁴ Many have likewise found it difficult, however, to reconcile Woolf’s spiritual, mystical, and/or religious tendencies with her steadfast, self-expressed nonreligious and atheistic beliefs. In this chapter, I follow in the path of those scholars who have sought to make sense of the mystical and religious characteristics of Woolf’s work, and I draw upon the work of such scholars to support and clarify my arguments. My goal is not to compare the “religious” parts of Woolf’s work with beliefs or practices associated with organized or institutional religion. Nor do I propose that Woolf was “secretly religious” or that the seemingly religious tendencies expressed in her writing fit neatly with institutional religious faith or doctrine.²⁰⁵ Instead, I seek to recognize the indisputable fact of Woolf’s atheism but to simultaneously illustrate that, as mentioned in chapter 2, a sense of the sacred persists in selections of Woolf’s fictional and nonfictional work and that this sense of the sacred can be better understood when considered in light of William James’s views of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience (as discussed in chapter 3).

In doing so, I will focus on two specific selections from Woolf’s body of work. The first selection comes from the climactic dinner scene found in chapter 17 of the opening section of

²⁰⁴ Recall, for instance, Beja’s comments concerning the role that epiphany (“a sudden spiritual manifestation”) plays in Woolf’s work, Paulsell’s remarks upon the “mystical quality” of Woolf’s writings, and Young’s claims about the “religious view of life” present in Woolf’s art.

²⁰⁵ Kearney does something similar to this in “Eucharistic Imaginings in Proust and Woolf” and “Sacramental Imagination: Eucharists of the Ordinary Universe in the Works of Joyce, Proust, and Woolf.” Kearney does not suggest that Woolf (or Proust or Joyce) is religious, but he does aim to equate aspects of Woolf’s work with the eucharistic celebration (associated with organized Christian religious practice).

Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. The second selection is an excerpt from Woolf's autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past." As I analyze these two selections — the former from a work of fiction and the latter from a work of nonfiction — I will argue that applying James's ideas about religion and mysticism to an investigation of these works of Woolf enables one to garner a better understanding of one specific way in which Woolf's writing may be described as having "religious" or "mystical" features, namely, by understanding these features in relation to James's conceptions of "religion" and "mysticism," and to plunge deeper into Woolf's work in a manner that merits further exploration as it seeks to more fully understand the sense of the sacred that persists in Woolf's writing. Additionally, I will contend that the religious and mystical aspects in *To the Lighthouse* and "A Sketch of the Past" are rooted not in the sacrality of established religious beliefs and practices related to an otherworldly being or concept but in the ordinary world of social community and everyday experience.

To the Lighthouse, Mrs. Ramsay, and the Move Toward the Mystical

Although there are a number of works by Virginia Woolf that would provide a solid foundation for an analysis of the religious and mystical features expressed in her art, *To the Lighthouse* is the Woolf novel most properly suited to my current project for a few reasons. First, *To the Lighthouse* has often been the focus of scholarly attention for those who have sought to delve into Woolf's religious and mystical tendencies.²⁰⁶ Second, given the attention that I devoted to the modernist period and to the literature produced during the modernist era (as

²⁰⁶ As a few examples: Beja gives a significant amount of attention to the novel in the section of *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* in which he discusses Woolf. Corner states in "Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*" that "the important connections and distinctions [between Woolf's atheism and her mysticism] are at the center of *To the Lighthouse*" (408). Additionally, *To the Lighthouse* is the basis of Kearney's two articles (mentioned in the previous note), and the novel features preeminently in Lewis's *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*.

discussed in chapter 2), it is worth noting that *To the Lighthouse* has been called “a major modernist event” that “has come to epitomize . . . modernist literature generally.”²⁰⁷ Third, if religion is, as James claims in *Varieties*, a person’s “total reaction upon life,”²⁰⁸ one does well to note that *To the Lighthouse* takes as its central subjects issues of life and death, the passage of time, the transformation of the self and of one’s relationships to others and to the world, and the reconciliation of the order and chaos of life.²⁰⁹ In tackling these topics, Woolf also broaches intense philosophical concerns, as well as questions related to traditional religious issues,²¹⁰ and the novel revolves around fundamental matters of human life and meaning.²¹¹

To the Lighthouse focuses on the Ramsay family — Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their eight children — and the friends and acquaintances who stay with them at their summer vacation house on the Isle of Skye. The novel is divided into three sections: “The Window,” “Time Passes,” and “The Lighthouse.” “The Window” is the longest of the novel’s sections and follows the activities of the Ramsays and their guests on a single summer day. “Time Passes” is the shortest section of the novel but spans a full ten years and provides almost no indication of what has happened in the lives of the novel’s characters, noting only (in parentheses) the deaths of certain members of the Ramsay family. The action of “The Lighthouse” returns again to the Ramsays’ summer house on the Isle of Skye and focuses on the ways in which the lives of the surviving characters have changed over the intervening decade. Due to constraints of space, I

²⁰⁷ Caughie, “Virginia Woolf,” 486-87.

²⁰⁸ James, *Varieties*, 35.

²⁰⁹ Çiğdem Pala Mull, “‘Transforming Ordinary Experience to an Ecstasy’: Virginia Woolf’s Autobiographical Novel *To the Lighthouse*,” *Idil Journal of Art and Language* 3, no. 11 (Winter 2014): 149.

²¹⁰ In the eleventh chapter of the novel, for instance, Mrs. Ramsay (one of the novel’s protagonists) grapples with the problem of evil, suffering, and death in the world, leading her to ask herself caustically, “How could any Lord have made this world?” (*To the Lighthouse*, 64).

²¹¹ A good example of this can be found in the opening sentence of chapter 17 (as discussed below), in which Mrs. Ramsay thinks, “But what have I done with my life?” (*To the Lighthouse*, 82).

will focus here only on chapter 17 of “The Window” and only on the character of Mrs. Ramsay and her experiences in the chapter.

A focus limited to this chapter and to the character of Mrs. Ramsay provides more than enough significant material for investigation, especially for an analysis concentrated on the ways in which William James’s views of religion and mysticism shed light on the religious and mystical qualities of Woolf’s writing. Mrs. Ramsay and her thoughts, feelings, and experiences have often been the starting point for scholarly investigations into *To the Lighthouse* — and not least of all into the mystical dimensions of *To the Lighthouse*. Not only do certain thematic concerns of the novel center around Mrs. Ramsay,²¹² but Mrs. Ramsay is also the character whose experiences appear most immediately recognizable as mystical.²¹³ In “Mysticism and Atheism in *To the Lighthouse*,” Corner writes that Mrs. Ramsay’s mystical experiences in the novel can be classified as “extravertive” mystical experiences, which involve not the “turning inwards toward the pure self” that characterizes “introvertive” mystical experiences, but rather “the interchange between the individual and the world around.”²¹⁴ Corner refers to these types of mystical experiences as “fusing” experiences, experiences in which an individual (in *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay) blends into unity with others and with the world as a whole.²¹⁵ This description of “fusing” experiences provides a good introduction to the experience that Mrs. Ramsay has in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse*.

²¹² Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 50.

²¹³ Corner, “Mysticism and Atheism,” 408. Although I will not discuss it in this project, Mrs. Ramsay has another experience in chapter 11 of the novel that has been recognized by scholars as having a “sort of quasi-religious” aspect to it (Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 163). This experience would be worth a deeper scholarly investigation in the future, as I have come across no sources that discuss its mystical features as fully as is warranted.

²¹⁴ Corner, “Mysticism and Atheism,” 410.

²¹⁵ Corner, “Mysticism and Atheism,” 410.

Chapter 17 is the longest chapter of *To the Lighthouse*. In the chapter, Woolf narrates the thoughts and feelings of various characters during a dinner at the Ramsays' summer house, and the chapter represents the climax of the novel's first section.²¹⁶ The first thing to note about the scene that Woolf details in chapter 17 is that the dinner itself presents a shift in the social and communal atmosphere of the novel. Prior to the commencement of scene, Woolf has portrayed the novel's characters as being involved in various individual and small-group tasks, and each character has been engaged in his or her own pursuits and goals. But chapter 17 represents a change in the social dynamics of the novel. Woolf stresses this point, writing in the closing paragraph of chapter 16:

[T]he great clangour of the gong announced solemnly, authoritatively, that all those scattered about, in attics, in bedrooms, on little perches on their own, reading, writing, putting the last smooth to their hair, or fastening dresses, must leave all that, and the little odds and ends on their washing-tables and dressing-tables, and the novels on the bed-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining-room for dinner.²¹⁷

Woolf thereby draws attention to the communal nature of the dinner event, even before it begins: *all those doing different things, on their own, must stop whatever they are doing, leave their private affairs, and assemble*. Social community is emphasized, a new type of community that Woolf has hitherto not narrated in the novel. The stage is set for new insight and new experience founded in a new type of social environment.

As the dinner commences and proceeds, Woolf narrates the scene by guiding the reader through the streams of consciousness of several of the novel's characters, but the majority of the scene's action is orchestrated by Mrs. Ramsay, and the majority of the scene's emotional

²¹⁶ Lewis appropriately remarks that the dinner scene of chapter 17 forms "arguably the central event of the novel" as a whole (*Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 150).

²¹⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 82.

atmosphere is depicted through the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Mrs. Ramsay.²¹⁸ The entirety of chapter 17 is framed by Mrs. Ramsay's thought in the chapter's opening line: "But what have I done with my life? thought Mrs. Ramsay, taking her place at the head of the table, and looking at all the plates making white circles on it."²¹⁹ Mrs. Ramsay has assumed the place of prominence in the scene — her existential question looms large as she sits at the head of the table and soon begins to ladle out soup to the guests — but she feels detached. She looks down the table and sees only empty white plates. When she turns her eyes toward her husband, she is unable to understand "how she had ever felt any emotion or affection for him."²²⁰ She has "a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, . . . as if there was an eddy — there — and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it."²²¹ "It's all come to an end," Mrs. Ramsay thinks, as her guests find their seats,²²² the unspecified "it" seeming to encompass everything.

Mrs. Ramsay continues to be overwhelmed by waves of further unhappy realizations and emotions. First, she is disappointed with and disconnected from others and from the world around her. She feels "more and more strongly, outside that eddy; as if a shade had fallen, and, robbed of colour, she saw things truly. . . . There was no beauty anywhere. . . . Nothing seemed to have merged. They [i.e., she and the dinner guests] all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her."²²³ Soon after, she is struck by the "strange

²¹⁸ Lazenby remarks on this subject: "*To the Lighthouse* conveys in detail Mrs. Ramsay's acts of self-contemplation, particularly illuminating and detailing her acute moments of self-collection (her sense of self-integration or self-identity)" (*A Mystical Philosophy*, 99).

²¹⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 82-83.

²²⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 83.

²²¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 83.

²²² Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 83.

²²³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 83. Note Lazenby's comment that *To the Lighthouse* "resonates the tension between unity . . . and disunity . . . throughout, and on several distinct levels: though particularly through the silent struggles and contemplations of Mrs. Ramsay" (*A Mystical Philosophy*, 80).

and distasteful” awareness of her own smallness and insignificance.²²⁴ Reminiscing with a guest about old friends whom she had not seen for 20 years, Mrs. Ramsay is amazed to realize that they “had been capable of going on living all these years when she had not thought of them more than once all that time,” and it displeases her to think that perhaps these friends “had not thought about her either.”²²⁵ A short while later, Mrs. Ramsay grows irritated with her husband, whom she finds “screwing his face up, . . . scowling and frowning, and flushing with anger” when one of the guests asks for another plate of soup.²²⁶

Near the middle of the chapter, however, a sharp change falls over Mrs. Ramsay and provides the basis for a new series of feelings that eventuate in her entering into a mystical state and having a mystical experience. As night descends upon the scene and the candles on the dinner table are lit, Woolf writes:

Now all the candles were lit up, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table, for the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily.

Some change went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. Mrs. Ramsay, who had been uneasy . . . and unable, she felt, to settle to things, now felt her uneasiness changed. . . . Some weight was taken off them; anything might happen, she felt.²²⁷

This abrupt and seemingly inexplicable change in Mrs. Ramsay’s assessment of her physical environment and emotional state opens the way to her subsequent experience. As Woolf narrates the latter half — and particularly the final quarter — of chapter 17, she describes the

²²⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 88.

²²⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 88.

²²⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 95.

²²⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 97-98.

thoughts and experiences of Mrs. Ramsay in a strikingly mystical way, so much so that the qualities of Mrs. Ramsay's experience bear marked similarities to the mystical state described by James in *Varieties*. Applying James's description of the mystical state as supplied in *Varieties* allows for an illustration of the extent to which one can fittingly analyze Mrs. Ramsay's experience through James's parameters.

The Mystical Experience of Mrs. Ramsay in Chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse*

As the meal nears its conclusion, Mrs. Ramsay experiences a state that, given the manner in which Woolf describes it, can properly be called "mystical" by James's description of the term. To begin, upon a close analysis, one can apply James's four marks of the mystical state to Mrs. Ramsay's experience near the end of chapter 17. First, one can examine the extent to which Mrs. Ramsay's experience adheres to James's mark of ineffability. As Mrs. Ramsay enters her mystical state, she feels that "[e]verything seemed possible. Everything seemed right. Just now . . . she had reached security; she hovered like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather. . . . Nothing need be said; nothing could be said."²²⁸ In this description, Mrs. Ramsay feels the ineffable feeling that James associates with the mystical state. As discussed in the previous chapter, when James speaks of the ineffability of the mystical state, he claims that the mystical state "defies expression," that "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words," and its feeling "must be directly experienced" and cannot be "transferred" to others.²²⁹ Mrs. Ramsay likewise feels, as Woolf narrates the scene, a sensation that cannot be captured in

²²⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 104-05.

²²⁹ James, *Varieties*, 290-91.

direct expression, only hinted at through the use of similes (“like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated”), and that ultimately cannot be imparted to others at all (“nothing could be said”).

Just as Mrs. Ramsay’s mystical feeling fits with James’s definition of the ineffability that characterizes the mystical state, so also Mrs. Ramsay’s experience conforms to James’s description of noetic quality, the second mark of the mystical state. Recalling that this mark refers to the manner in which mystical states are “states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by discursive intellect,” “illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance,”²³⁰ Woolf’s description of Mrs. Ramsay’s state takes on greater meaning. Looking at her dinner guests —“husband and children and friends” — Woolf writes that Mrs. Ramsay feels a “profound stillness” that “seemed now for no special reason to stay there like a fume rising upwards, holding them safe together. . . . There it was, all round them. It partook, she felt . . . of eternity.”²³¹ The moment in which Mrs. Ramsay feels the profound stillness and comes to an awareness of the way it holds her and her guests together denotes for her a truly significant and important revelation, the recognition of a type of reality that unites her with those she loves and allows all of them to share in a sense of eternity.

The third of James’s four marks of a mystical state is transiency, and James’s claim that a mystical experience cannot last long proves true in Mrs. Ramsay’s case. Although Woolf does not provide any specific information that enables one to determine the exact amount of time that Mrs. Ramsay’s mystical state endures, one can confidently assume²³² that the length of Mrs.

²³⁰ James, *Varieties*, 291.

²³¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 105.

²³² As touched upon briefly above, the idea of time and of the passage of time in *To the Lighthouse* is interesting, and it is not always clear exactly how long it takes for certain events to transpire in the novel. Woolf makes very few concrete remarks about the temporal duration of the novel’s events. During the meal, for instance, she never writes, “After five minutes, the guests were all settled” or “The candles were lit as the clock struck 9” (or anything similar to this). She never provides any specific time for the dinner’s beginning or end, and so it is impossible to know exactly how long the action of chapter 17 lasts or the rate at which time passes in the chapter.

Ramsay's mystical experience fits within James's claim that mystical states can be sustained for "half an hour, or at most an hour or two," before "fad[ing] into the light of common day."²³³ Near the beginning of her mystical experience, when she feels that "[e]verything" seems "possible" and "right," Mrs. Ramsay realizes that the feelings of her mystical state must be transient, as she thinks to herself "this cannot last."²³⁴ Mrs. Ramsay's recognition of the transiency of the mystical state proves accurate, and by the conclusion of the meal, her mystical experience has run its rapid course and come to an end. As Woolf describes the scene as Mrs. Ramsay exits the dining room at the end of the chapter, "With her foot on the threshold [of the door], [Mrs. Ramsay] waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved . . . and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past."²³⁵

Finally, James's fourth mark of the mystical state is passivity, in which an individual "feels as if his [*sic*] own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he [*sic*] were grasped and held by a superior power."²³⁶ Such a type of passivity falls upon Mrs. Ramsay in chapter 17. During her mystical experience, Woolf writes that, as Mrs. Ramsay feels her and her guests being *held* by the power of the stillness around them, Mrs. Ramsay senses that "there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling . . . of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures."²³⁷ Mrs. Ramsay's feeling of passive serenity during her mystical experience becomes

Nonetheless, although the passage of time is difficult to gauge in Woolf's narration, the reader can feel certain that Mrs. Ramsay's mystical state at the dinner lasted a very short time: minutes, not hours.

²³³ James, *Varieties*, 291.

²³⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 104.

²³⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 111.

²³⁶ James, *Varieties*, 291.

²³⁷ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 105.

increasingly noteworthy when contrasted with her feelings before entering her mystical state. Recall that at the beginning of the chapter, Mrs. Ramsay “had a sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything, . . . as if there was an eddy . . . and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it. It’s all come to an end, she thought.”²³⁸ In her mystical state, Mrs. Ramsay is grasped by a tranquility and a feeling of stability that exists beyond her but that nonetheless holds her in its grasp and erases her feelings of discontentment and disconnection.

Additionally, in his description of passivity, James notes that mystical states always leave the individual some memory of their content, along with “a profound sense of their importance,” and in this way, they “modify the inner life of the subject.”²³⁹ As Mrs. Ramsay reflects upon her experience during the meal in the wake of its conclusion, Woolf notes that Mrs. Ramsay

felt rather inclined just for a moment to stand still after all that chatter [of the dinner], and pick out one particular thing; the thing that mattered; to detach it; separate it off; clean it of all the emotions and odds and ends of things, and so hold it before her. . . . So she righted herself after the shock of the event, and quite unconsciously and incongruously, used the branches of the elm trees outside to help stabilise her position. Her world was changing; they were still. The event had given her a sense of movement. All must be in order. She must get that right and that right, she thought.²⁴⁰

In this description, Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the importance of her experience and seeks to determine exactly what has happened to her and to “clean it off” and “hold it before her,” so as to come to terms with and understand her mystical state. Though reeling “after the shock of the event,” Mrs. Ramsay feels changed and impelled to motion, to what James might call a modification of her inner life, to put her world in order, to “get that right and that right.”

²³⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 83.

²³⁹ James, *Varieties*, 292.

²⁴⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 112-13.

Hence, having analyzed Mrs. Ramsay's experience in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* through the lens of James's four marks of the mystical state, one can recognize the ways in which Woolf's description of Mrs. Ramsay's experience properly fits within the parameters provided by James in *Varieties*. Mrs. Ramsay experiences the ineffability and noetic quality of the mystical state, and her state is likewise marked by transiency and passivity. She recognizes the importance of her experience once it has concluded, seeks to understand the memory of it, and feels changed and motivated to make positive changes to herself and to her world.

This being the case, I can now turn attention to the ways in which Mrs. Ramsay's experience aligns with other comments made by James concerning mysticism and the mystical state. As mentioned above, James states in *Varieties* that an individual "passes into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest," feeling them "as reconciling, unifying states" in which "the unlimited absorbs the limits."²⁴¹ Likewise, James outlines the powerful feelings of mystical experiences by stating that mystical states "tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, of rest."²⁴² With this in mind, certain aspects of Woolf's description of Mrs. Ramsay's experience become especially noteworthy.

During her experience, for example, Mrs. Ramsay feels "a coherence in things, a stability" and reaches a state "of peace" and, in an instance in which Woolf and James use the same word, "of rest."²⁴³ Furthermore, Mrs. Ramsay's mystical state brings her from a feeling of smallness and isolation to a feeling of vastness and union with the transcendent. Prior to her mystical experience, Mrs. Ramsay feels "past everything, through everything, out of

²⁴¹ James, *Varieties*, 317.

²⁴² James, *Varieties*, 326.

²⁴³ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 105.

everything.”²⁴⁴ In her mystical state, on the other hand, she feels a “profound stillness . . . all round” her and her guests, a stillness that holds them safe together in a moment that partakes “of eternity.”²⁴⁵ As she reflects upon her mystical experience after its conclusion, she feels that it has “struck everything into stability.”²⁴⁶ During her mystical state, and as a result of it, Mrs. Ramsay no longer feels disconnected and disjointed; she feels reconciled with others and united with that which endures. She no longer feels restless, irritated, or fearful; she feels at peace in a state of rest. She is no longer in a state of worried upheaval; she has reached a feeling of security and vastness. Thus, one achieves new ways of understanding Woolf’s narration of Mrs. Ramsay’s experience by using James’s description and parameters of the mystical state.

Mrs. Ramsay and the Sacrality of Social Community

If one is to make the claim, as I do, that Mrs. Ramsay’s experience in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* can be properly understood as “mystical” using James’s views of mysticism as outlined in *Varieties*, the question then arises as to the source or catalyst for such a mystical experience. James bases his discussion of mysticism in *Varieties* on its relation to personal religious experience, but how does such a discussion relate to the nonreligious and atheistic views of Woolf, particularly as expressed (in this case) via the narrated experience of the atheistic Mrs. Ramsay?²⁴⁷ Can one reconcile James’s views on religion and mysticism with the atheism of Woolf and her character?

²⁴⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 83.

²⁴⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 105.

²⁴⁶ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 113.

²⁴⁷ Although never explicitly stated in the novel (as it is with other characters, such as “the little atheist” Charles Tansley), it can be deduced from the novel that Mrs. Ramsay does not believe in God/gods. In a moment of self-contemplation in chapter 11 of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay says to herself, “We are in the hands of the Lord.” As Woolf narrates what occurs next: “But instantly [Mrs. Ramsay] was annoyed with herself. Who had said it? Not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean. . . . What had brought her to say that: ‘We are in the

The answer to this latter question is “yes,” and the answer to the former question springs from this “yes.” One can reconcile James’s views on religion and mysticism with the (lack of) belief(s) of Woolf and Mrs. Ramsay because James’s conceptions of religion and mysticism are, as discussed in chapter 3, so broad and generous. James contends that any person studying the subject of religion will likely find no single religious essence but various characteristics that are important to religion. Religion, as James approaches and conceives of it in *Varieties*, is about personal experience with any godlike object, not necessarily with God or a god. The “more” that a person encounters during a religious experience *may* be a personal god but could well be something aside from a deity. If one takes all of James’s comments about religion seriously and in their fullness, one can hardly fail to recognize that religion for James does not equate to a theistic belief system and that a person, even if she is not religious herself, may have experiences that can be effectively analyzed under James’s category of “religion.” And if these experiences are in some ways “religious” (according to James’s characterization of the term), it is appropriate to assume that they may indeed be rooted and centered in states of consciousness that are “mystical” (in James’s description) but not “theistic.”

In chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse*, one finds that Mrs. Ramsay’s religious and mystical experience is founded not in any otherworldly occurrence or any contact with a supreme being; it is founded instead in the ordinary world of a meal and the sacrality of the social community of those gathered for it. Mrs. Ramsay’s character in the novel is defined to a large extent by her gift for bringing people together, for creating community among and relationship between her

hands of the Lord?’ she wondered. The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her. . . . How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor” (*To the Lighthouse*, 63-64).

guests,²⁴⁸ and she is consistently concerned about the social dynamic of the summer house at which she and her guests reside.²⁴⁹ These features of Mrs. Ramsay face their biggest challenge — and ultimately their biggest triumph — in the dinner scene of chapter 17, in which Mrs. Ramsay’s main objective is to engender a unified social community from the various guests at the meal.²⁵⁰

The task of creating community at the dinner is not one that is easily accomplished, however. Recall aspects of Mrs. Ramsay’s feelings and experiences at the beginning of chapter 17. She feels no emotion for her husband. She sees all her guests sitting separately in a scene in which nothing merged or flowed together. She is reminded by one guest of a social relationship that she had had many years ago but that had since deteriorated, and she realizes her own social insignificance. She feels generally out of the social eddy — until the candles at the table are lit, and both the social scene and Mrs. Ramsay’s feelings shift distinctly. As “all the candles were lit up, . . . the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candlelight, and composed, as they had not been in the twilight, into a party round a table,” and “the night was now shut off by panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that here, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Mrs. Ramsay is described throughout the novel as having “a singular gift for ‘summoning together’: for bringing couples into liaison; for holding her brood of either children in material connection, and her husband in marriage” (Kearney, “Sacramental Imagination,” 202).

²⁴⁹ This is especially true of the dinner scene of chapter 17. Michael H. Whitworth has noted that “Mrs. Ramsay’s organization at the dinner . . . is an expression of her imaginative life: she needs to connect disparate elements, balancing one guest against another” (Michael H. Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 114). Such a comment resonates with Brian Phillips’s remark that Woolf’s characters “are constantly trying to get beyond their own minds, to know something real about each other and about the world” (Brian Phillips, “Reality and Virginia Woolf,” *The Hudson Review* 56, no. 3 [Autumn 2003]: 424-25).

²⁵⁰ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 164. Janis Paul calls the dinner scene “Mrs. Ramsay’s culminating moment . . . , a transforming moment of social community” (“Teaching *To the Lighthouse*,” 40).

²⁵¹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 97.

A close reading of this excerpt (also mentioned in the previous section) illustrates the emphasis that Woolf gives to portraying the newfound type of social community engendered by the lighting of the candles. The faces of guests are brought nearer, seemingly both physically and symbolically, as the candles are lit. Whereas, prior to the candles being lit, the guests at the table were (apparently) merely a collection of individuals in the same setting, they now have been composed into a singular party around a table. Not only have the various guests been united into one group, but Woolf stresses that the group itself is a united entity against the chaos outside of and apart from it. The darkness of the night is shut off from them by the light in the dining room. The outside world — the world from which the dinner guests have separated themselves — is portrayed as insubstantial, a world in which things are vague and unstable. The world inside the dining room, however, is safe, ordered, and secure.²⁵² The lighting of the candles thus has two distinct yet connected effects for the social dynamic of the group at the meal. First, it unites the individuals at the meal to one another and creates of the numerous guests a single social community. Second, it separates this newly created social community from the outside world, from “that world” that exists beyond the confines of the dining room and from “those people” who inhabit that watery area.²⁵³

²⁵² Paul makes a similar observation in her analysis of the way Woolf uses the dichotomies of day/night and inside/outside in *To the Lighthouse*: “During the day, the Ramsays and their guests walk in the garden, essentially alone with their thoughts; they stop to look through the gap in the hedge at the freedom and openness of the sea. But at night, the sea’s limitlessness inspires not freedom from social restrictions but fear of death and oblivion; the characters gather inside the hedge and inside the house, doors and windows closed, candles lit. Their moment of fulfillment comes not from escape into their own inner lives but from the traditional social unity of Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party, symbolized by . . . the enclosure of dry land, home, society, and tradition” (“Teaching *To the Lighthouse*,” 38).

²⁵³ These points find support in what Woolf writes about the guests directly after the sentence in which she describes the lighting of the candles: “Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there” (*To the Lighthouse*, 97).

It is precisely at the point that the guests become a new social community that Mrs. Ramsay begins to enter her mystical state. The importance of the creation of social community to Mrs. Ramsay's mystical state follows further from the fact that Mrs. Ramsay's mystical experience takes place *in relation to* the sacrality of the social community, her "divine," her godlike object. The coalescing of her various dinner guests into a united social entity makes her feel that everything seems possible and right; it gives her a sense of security and enables her to perceive a profound stillness holding her and her guests together, creating a moment that Mrs. Ramsay feels partakes of eternity and provides her with peace and rest. It is the end of the meal — the end of the transient time of sacred social community engendered by the meal — that marks the end of Mrs. Ramsay's mystical state. It is as she exits the room, with her foot on the threshold of the door, that she gazes back on a scene that "[is] vanishing even as she look[s]," and as she moves to leave the room, she finds that "it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she [knows], giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past."²⁵⁴

If one considers Richard Kearney's claim that "Mrs. Ramsay's soul is somewhat porously interconnected with the scattered souls of those around her"²⁵⁵ in conjunction with the mystical feelings and experiences of Mrs. Ramsay during the dinner scene of *To the Lighthouse*, one might well agree that Mrs. Ramsay desires in a fundamental way to be connected to those around her and that she finds the mystical "supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest"²⁵⁶ when she becomes part of a united social community that enables her to draw those scattered souls around her into one cohesive whole. One might also say that the experiences of Mrs. Ramsay at the meal are "religious" by James's definition of the term.

²⁵⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 111.

²⁵⁵ Kearney, "Sacramental Imagination," 202.

²⁵⁶ James, *Varieties*, 326.

Religion, James claims, if it is to mean anything definite, must mean nothing short of “the keynote of the universe sounding in our ears, and everlasting possession spread before our eyes.”²⁵⁷ Mrs. Ramsay finds this in the solemnity of her social “divine,” as she “hover[s] like a hawk suspended; like a flag floated in an element of joy, which filled every nerve of her body fully and sweetly, not noisily, solemnly rather.”²⁵⁸ She finds it as she experiences the moment in which “the thing is made that endures.”²⁵⁹

The Mystical Nature of Woolf’s “Moments of Being”

The experience of Mrs. Ramsay at the dinner scene of chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* is by no means the only mystically-tinged section in Woolf’s fictional work. It is, however, a clear and powerful example of the mystical features present in many of Woolf’s novels, and for that reason, it has been (as noted above) the focus of much of the scholarly attention given to the “religious” and “mystical” aspects of Woolf’s fiction. In a similar fashion, when scholars have turned their concentration to the “religious” and/or “mystical” features of Woolf’s nonfictional work, they have often focused on Woolf’s autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past.” Much of the attention that scholars have given to “A Sketch of the Past” has centered upon experiences that Woolf describes in the essay as “moments of being.” I will provide a full explanation of how Woolf characterizes these “moments of being” shortly, but it is important to first note that it is precisely the concept of “moments of being” that scholars have linked to the “religious” and/or “mystical” elements of not only Woolf’s nonfictional work but of her fictional work, as well. That is, the term “moments of being” appears in “A Sketch of the Past,” and Woolf details

²⁵⁷ James, *Varieties*, 45.

²⁵⁸ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 105.

²⁵⁹ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 105.

specific “moments of being” that have occurred in her life, but scholars have recognized that, given Woolf’s description of the term “moments of being,” “moments of being” appear also in her fictional work, including in *To the Lighthouse*.

Beja notes in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, for instance, that moments of being are “little daily miracles, illuminations” that are “essential to a full understanding of [Woolf’s] work,”²⁶⁰ including *To the Lighthouse*, in which “Woolf’s characters achieve a measure of union — of salvation — through a climactic moment of being.”²⁶¹ If the result of a moment of being is a character’s achieving a sort of union with others and/or with the world, then it is evident that among those characters who experience a moment of being is Mrs. Ramsay, whose experience in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* centers on her feelings of unity and oneness with her dinner guests. In a similar manner, Paulsell states that Woolf’s moments of being entail “the flooding of what is real and lasting into [one’s] experience,” enabling one to acquire “knowledge that [one is] connected to all living beings, and that what is real and lasting consists of these connections.”²⁶² Such a description of Woolf’s moments of being again fits with Mrs. Ramsay’s experience in chapter 17. Indeed, Lewis claims that Mrs. Ramsay’s experience “appears to be one of [Woolf’s] moments of being,”²⁶³ specifically in the way that her moment of being “temporarily allow[s] the barriers between one mind and another to evaporate.”²⁶⁴

My point is to illustrate that, although the term “moments of being” appears in “A Sketch of the Past,” moments of being are a key feature in Woolf’s fictional work, and one can classify

²⁶⁰ Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, 112. Beja uses the term “moment[s] of vision” and “moment[s] of being” interchangeably when discussing Woolf’s work.

²⁶¹ Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, 143.

²⁶² Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 263.

²⁶³ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 165.

²⁶⁴ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 153.

Mrs. Ramsay's mystical experience in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* as a moment of being.²⁶⁵ In this way, a study of Mrs. Ramsay's mystical experience in the dinner-party scene of *To the Lighthouse* and a study of Woolf's descriptions of the moments of being that she experienced in her personal life go hand-in-hand. A further corollary, then, is that a study of mystical experience and a study of Woolf's personal moments of being likewise go together. I will now turn my attention to "A Sketch of the Past" — and specifically to Woolf's description of the "moments of being" contained therein. I will first analyze what a "moment of being" is, according to Woolf's characterization, and then will use the conceptions of mysticism and mystical experience that James provides in *Varieties* and "A Suggestion About Mysticism" to propose insights into the mystical nature of Woolf's moments of being.

Woolf began writing "A Sketch of the Past" in April 1939. A large portion of the essay focuses on Woolf's memories of her childhood, the events that made a striking and lasting impact on her, and the people who shaped her life. It is at the beginning of the essay, as she focuses on specific powerful memories of her earliest years, that Woolf introduces the term "moments of being." Woolf uses the term in contrast to what she calls "moments of non-being." As Woolf explains, moments of non-being are the unimportant, easily unremembered moments that saturate daily life: "I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool. This is always so. A great part of every day is not lived consciously."²⁶⁶ Moments of non-being are comprised of this unconsciously-lived part of each day. Embedded in these many moments of non-being, however, are moments of being. Reflecting on her childhood, Woolf

²⁶⁵ A contention supported by Sim: "Moments of being feature in many of [Woolf's] essays and all of her novels" (*Virginia Woolf*, 137).

²⁶⁶ Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being*, 2nd ed., ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 70. The "Leonard" here refers to Woolf's husband.

states that her early life “contained a large portion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed . . . and nothing made any dint upon me. Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock; something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life.”²⁶⁷ These shocks are Woolf’s moments of being. As Woolf depicts them, these moments bear similarities to phenomena that might be called “‘secular mystical experiences,’ in which a person feels the sensations but not the convictions of the [religious] mystic,”²⁶⁸ and it has been suggested that Woolf may have intentionally used the term “moments of being” to evade the connotations of “mysticism.”²⁶⁹

The first example of a moment of being in “A Sketch of the Past” opens the essays and details Woolf’s earliest memory. Woolf states that this earliest memory

is the most important of all my memories. If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills — then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in a bed in the nursery at St. Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.²⁷⁰

Woolf proceeds to remark in relation to this memory, “I could spend hours trying to write that [i.e., the description of the memory] as it should be written, in order to give you the feeling which is even at this moment very strong in me. But I should fail (unless I had some wonderful

²⁶⁷ Woolf, “Sketch,” 71.

²⁶⁸ Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, 123. Sim similarly notes that “critics have compared [Woolf’s moments of being] to the modernist epiphany and both Christian and secular versions of the mystical experience” but contends that Woolf’s moments of being refer “to a wide range of experiences that may not be equivalent to any one of these traditions or terms” (*Virginia Woolf*, 137).

²⁶⁹ Kane, “Varieties of Mystical Experience,” 332. I have not come across enough evidence in my research to support this proposal, but a diary entry from January 1918 does suggest Woolf’s suspicion of mysticism. Writing of author John Mills Whitham, Woolf states that he “had dabbled in mysticism, & had made tables walz [*sic*] & heard phantom raps & believed it all. . . . I expect he hasn’t a good head on his shoulders” (Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 1, ed. Anne Olivier Bell [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977], 114).

²⁷⁰ Woolf, “Sketch,” 64-65.

luck).”²⁷¹ The issue of expressing and explaining the feeling of this moment of being seems to reside in Woolf’s interpretation that, in such moments, she is not only the subject to whom the moment is occurring but, perhaps more importantly, the passive object through which it is occurring. As she recalls her childhood moments of being, she remarks that in them she is “hardly aware of [herself], but only of the sensation,” that she is “only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.”²⁷²

Such feelings of ecstasy and rapture are part-and-parcel of the revelations and insights that characterize the “shock” inherent in Woolf’s moments of being. Recalling another childhood memory that occurred in St. Ives, this time not in the nursery but in the garden, Woolf writes, “I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; ‘That is the whole,’ I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.”²⁷³ The similarities between this moment of being and the one that Woolf’s describes in her earliest childhood memory are noteworthy. First, both involve detailed sensory input: hearing water and waves, seeing a flower. Second, both entail interpretation of that sensory input in a way that leads to profound conclusions: Woolf is alive, exists; the flower is whole, is two things (earth and flower) in unity.²⁷⁴ Third, and most importantly for my project, these moments of being and the insights that characterize them occur in a way that is distinctly mystical and immediately

²⁷¹ Woolf, “Sketch,” 65. Recall Barnard’s point that mystical experiences, by James’s conception of them, should be categorized as “mystical” only if they succeed in significantly reshaping a person’s worldview (see Barnard, “Exploring Unseen Worlds,” 18). The experience Woolf narrates clearly affected her worldview.

²⁷² Woolf, “Sketch,” 67. As Corner points out, statements such as these serve to highlight the involuntary nature of Woolf’s moments of being (“Mysticism and Atheism,” 411).

²⁷³ Woolf, “Sketch,” 71.

²⁷⁴ Recall James’s remark in *Varieties* that “[t]he kinds of truth communicable in mystical states . . . are various. Some of them relate to this world . . . but the most important revelations are theological or metaphysical” (*Varieties*, 313).

related to the ordinary world of everyday life, to “the essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities that frames [one’s] forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds,”²⁷⁵ including events, objects, and settings that suggest “ideas of familiarity, routine, custom, and habit.”²⁷⁶

As mentioned in this chapter (and as outlined in detail in chapter 3), James provides in *Varieties* four marks of the mystical state — ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity — and a close reading of Woolf’s remarks in the two aforementioned memories illustrates that James’s four marks characterize these moments of being for Woolf. Woolf states, as noted, that she “could spend hours trying to write” an appropriate description of her first memory in order to give her reader “the feeling which is even at this moment very strong” in her.²⁷⁷ Her fear that even then she would fail to communicate the feeling speaks to the ineffability of her experience.²⁷⁸ Woolf’s moments of being also contain a noetic quality. In describing the “sudden shocks” of her moments of being, Woolf states that she “always feel[s] instantly that they are particularly valuable” in the way that the shock she feels “is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances.”²⁷⁹ Woolf’s moments of being thus bring her a type of knowledge and truth deeper than she perceives in her typical moments of non-being.²⁸⁰ Additionally, the term “moments of being” suggests a transiency to Woolf’s experiences of the phenomena. A moment is, by definition, a very short period of time. Woolf’s

²⁷⁵ Felski, *Doing Time*, 77.

²⁷⁶ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 8.

²⁷⁷ Woolf, “Sketch,” 65.

²⁷⁸ As explained in chapter 3, James comments that the mystical state “defies expression, [and] no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. . . . No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in which the quality or worth of it consists” (*Varieties*, 291).

²⁷⁹ Woolf, “Sketch,” 72. Appropriately, James describes mystical states as “states of knowledge” that are characterized by “revelations” (*Varieties*, 291).

²⁸⁰ Sim equates Woolf’s recognition of “some real thing behind appearances” to “an apprehension of a numinous reality apart from the empirical world” (*Virginia Woolf*, 155).

further manner of equating a moment of being with receiving a shock speaks to the brief and sudden nature of its occurrence.²⁸¹ Finally, Woolf speaks repeatedly of the passivity she experiences during her moments of being. As noted, when describing certain of her moments of being, Woolf states that during them she is “hardly aware of [herself],” is “only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.”²⁸² Commenting again upon the feelings present during her moments of being, Woolf states that “they [i.e., the moments] seemed dominant; myself passive,”²⁸³ and in another instance, she remarks that she felt during one particular moment of being “as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off. . . . I could not explain it.”²⁸⁴

Just as James’s comments about the four marks of the mystical state in *Varieties* prove applicable to an analysis of Woolf’s remarks on the mystical nature of her moments of being, so too James’s views about the mystical consciousness in “A Suggestion About Mysticism” help to further illuminate the ways in which Woolf’s moments of being can be seen as mystical. Recall that James’s fundamental “suggestion about mysticism” “is that states of mystical intuition may only be very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary ‘field of consciousness’”²⁸⁵ and that such an extension of the ordinary field of consciousness “bring[s] a mass of subconscious memories, conceptions, emotional feelings, and perceptions of relation, etc., into view all at once,” engendering “the conditions . . . for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like

²⁸¹ See Paulsell, “Writing and Mystical Experience,” 251.

²⁸² Woolf, “Sketch,” 67. This aligns with James’s comment the mystic often “feels as if [her] own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if [she] were grasped and held by a superior power” during a mystical state (*Varieties*, 292).

²⁸³ Woolf, “Sketch,” 72.

²⁸⁴ Woolf, “Sketch,” 78. Note the combination of passivity with both the noetic quality of the experience (Woolf’s being exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning) and its ineffability (Woolf had no way of explaining it).

²⁸⁵ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 157.

that termed mystical.”²⁸⁶ Woolf’s descriptions of her moments of being seem to hinge upon shifts in the way that her consciousness interacts with and interprets the world around her. In the moment of being that comprises her earliest memory, Woolf’s consciousness expands in such a way as to allow what ordinarily might have gone unnoticed or been taken for granted — the sound of the waves, the sight of the light, the noise of the blind — to become the basis of revelation and ecstasy. Woolf finds in her first memory, her first moment of being, reality and illumination, the sense that, as she writes, “it is almost impossible that I should be here.”²⁸⁷ A similar type of the expansion of Woolf’s consciousness occurs in Woolf’s aforementioned moment of being in the garden at St. Ives. Looking at a flower, Woolf “suddenly” realizes the nature of the flower’s existence, of its wholeness, of the unity of disparate yet similar elements (in this case, the flower and the earth), all of which brings to Woolf what James might well term “a curious sense of cognition of real fact.”²⁸⁸

Perhaps most profoundly, Woolf’s moments of being create for her a sense of relation and unification that James associates with the shift in the field of consciousness that is essential to the mystical state. As discussed in chapter 3, James uses in “A Suggestion About Mysticism” an analogy related to the rising and falling of an ocean’s tides to explain his views on mysticism and the field of consciousness. James claims that a change in the field of consciousness during a mystical state produces a phenomenon similar to what occurs when a tide goes out: “Vast tracts usually covered are then revealed to view, but nothing rises more than a few inches above the

²⁸⁶ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 159.

²⁸⁷ Woolf, “Sketch,” 65, recalling James’s comment that the expansion of the field of consciousness in a mystical state creates a consciousness “of reality . . . and illumination, possibly rapturously so” (“A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 159). Consider also Sim’s comment that “reality” for Woolf “is paradoxically single in nature . . . yet it is also complex and multifarious in terms of the numerous things in the material world through which she apprehends it and which partake of that unity” (*Virginia Woolf*, 169).

²⁸⁸ James, “A Suggestion About Mysticism,” 160.

water's bed, and great parts of the scene are submerged again whenever a wave washes over them."²⁸⁹ James thus contends that an expansion in one's field of consciousness allows aspects of consciousness that are usually not accessible to become temporarily accessible and "uncovered," this sense of "uncovering" being "the essence of the phenomenon" that occurs as the field of consciousness changes during a mystical experience.²⁹⁰ In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf comments upon her moments of being in a way that seems strikingly similar to James's analogy.

Woolf states that she possesses an "instinctive notion . . . that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality."²⁹¹ Based upon this remark, Woolf's experiences of her moments of being bring her insights into reality; they are the moments when reality floods in through the cracks, and that which is real and meaningful and inherently true is suddenly available to her, shocks her, deals her a blow.²⁹² Woolf's analogy of vessels afloat upon reality can thus be seen as a different way of describing the type of phenomenon found in James's analogy of the movement of the tide. In each analogy, there is a commonplace state of being, an ordinary state of consciousness. For Woolf, it is a state in which one floats upon reality in a sealed vessel; for James, it is a state in which parts of one's consciousness are concealed by water. There are also, however, in each analogy, powerful and shocking moments when commonplace existence and ordinary consciousness change and are transformed by the profound and extraordinary. The sealing matter cracks, and reality floods in; the water level falls, new fields of consciousness are revealed, and new types of knowledge become accessible. It is when

²⁸⁹ James, "A Suggestion About Mysticism," 157-58.

²⁹⁰ James, "A Suggestion About Mysticism," 160.

²⁹¹ Woolf, "Sketch," 142.

²⁹² As Paulsell states, Woolf's moments of being involve "the flooding of what is real and lasting into [her] experience" and "not only form the basis for Woolf's beliefs about what is real and lasting, [but] . . . also make her sensitive to what is false and temporary" ("Writing and Mystical Experience," 263).

these changes occur that it becomes possible for a mystical state to settle upon a person, for a mystical consciousness to hold a person, for a mystical experience to occur to a person, as testified to by Woolf's moments of being.

The result, as Woolf expresses it in "A Sketch of the Past," is that her moments of being enable her to become aware of the fundamental state of reality and of her fundamental position therein. Writing that the experiences of her moments of being provide her with "revelation[s] of some order" and are "token[s] of some real thing behind appearances," Woolf explains that, from these revelations and tokens, "I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool [of non-being] is a hidden pattern; that we — I mean all human beings — are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art."²⁹³ She continues, "*Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare; there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And when I see this I have a shock."²⁹⁴ For Woolf, the mystical nature of her moments of being — the moments when reality floods in through the cracks of the sealed vessel — reveals for her a double sense of unification. First, Woolf's moments of being prompt her to recognize that human beings are all connected to the hidden pattern behind the cotton wool of non-being, for her intuition of "a pattern, a formal unity, behind appearances" arises from to her experiences of "ecstatic moment[s] of self-transcendence."²⁹⁵ Second, Woolf's moments of being affirm for her that human beings are all connected to each other and to the world. As her "moments of being present images of the external world flooding into a subject, or a change in the boundary

²⁹³ Woolf, "Sketch," 72.

²⁹⁴ Woolf, "Sketch," 72.

²⁹⁵ Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 43.

between inner and outer, self and world,” her resultant feelings of “ecstasy” are “connected to her sense of physical encapsulation and unity with the world.”²⁹⁶

Woolf sums up the insights that her moments of being provide for her by concluding that all human beings — the communal “we” — are the words, the music, the thing itself. The mystical unity that Woolf perceives is not a unity between herself and a supreme being or otherworldly deity; indeed, Woolf contends “certainly and emphatically” that God does not exist. Instead, as in the dinner scene of *To the Lighthouse*, the unity that Woolf perceives, the unity that she knows, is founded in a sense of the sacred that human beings create together, in the oneness of humans in their relationships to each other, making certain moments of being described in Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction “moments of total mystical unity — where each person is connected to the other and all are part of some inexplicable pattern.”²⁹⁷

The basis for the recognition of this human oneness, for the recognition of the relation that all human beings share with the hidden pattern behind the cotton wool and with one another, resides for Woolf in the ordinary experiences of everyday life. These experiences do not involve celestial interventions or heavenly manifestations; rather, they involve everyday occurrences that can become windows that open into profound awareness, understanding, and meaning. Woolf’s experiences illustrate that looking at a flower in a garden can be an ordinary experience that enables a person to gain new insights into the world and the unity in it. Woolf’s experiences illustrate that the sound of waves breaking on a beach or of wind blowing through a blind can be an ordinary experience that leads to a person’s becoming cognizant of the remarkable and ecstatic fact of her own existence. Woolf’s narration of Mrs. Ramsay’s experiences in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* illustrates that the ordinary event of a meal can transform the way a

²⁹⁶ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 145.

²⁹⁷ Moore, *The Short Season*, 119.

character thinks about herself, her world, and questions related to the meaning of her life and the lives of those she knows and loves. The ordinary and everyday is the foundation for Woolf's writing and for its "religious" and "mystical" elements.

Nearing the end of his lectures on mysticism in *Varieties*, James claims that the "overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic [*sic*] states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed."²⁹⁸ If one takes this contention seriously, then one can hardly fail to see that, as illustrated in this chapter, aspects of Woolf's fictional and nonfictional work must be considered in any full discussion of the "mystical." One could only miss this point if one were to fail to appreciate how broad the category of the "mystical" is or should be. Woolf possessed what could be called an "Absolute," but it was not a deity or any sort of entity that is the subject of institutional religious worship. It was instead the world in which she lived: the world with its sights and sounds and experiences, the world with its ordinary and everyday aspects, the world with its human beings in communion with one another and with the hidden pattern that exists behind things. Her experiences led her to these conclusions, but they did not directly solve the problem of how she could overcome the barriers that existed between her and the world, between herself and others. Nor did her experiences inherently enable her to become one with her Absolute. Woolf needed something else to make that occur, and that something else was the act of writing and the creation of art itself. It is to this final matter that I now turn my attention, for no discussion that deals with the religious and/or mystical aspects of Woolf's work is complete without considering the crucial importance that the act of writing had for Woolf and her life.

²⁹⁸ James, *Varieties*, 320.

CHAPTER 5: JAMES, WOOLF, RELIGION, AND BEYOND

In the previous chapter, I analyzed a selection from Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* and a selection from her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past" in order to demonstrate that one can apply William James's ideas about religion and mysticism to an investigation of these works in such a way that enables one to garner a better understanding of the "religious" and "mystical" features of Woolf's writing. I asserted that a sense of the sacred persists in Woolf's work, but as I illustrated in my examination of Mrs. Ramsay's experience in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* and Woolf's "moments of being" in "A Sketch of the Past," the religious and mystical aspects of *To the Lighthouse* and "A Sketch of the Past" are found not in the sacrality of institutional religious belief and practice related to an otherworldly being or concept but in the ordinary world of social community and everyday experience.

I concluded the chapter by mentioning the importance of the act of writing for Woolf and for the religious and mystical features present in her work. Woolf speaks to the role of writing in her life in "A Sketch of the Past." Three specific examples warrant attention. First, referencing her description of "moments of being" as "sudden violent shock[s]," Woolf states that "*the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer.*"²⁹⁹ Second, shortly thereafter, Woolf comments that her moments of being provide for her "a token of some real thing behind appearances; *and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole.*"³⁰⁰ Finally, referring to her intuition "that behind the cotton wool [of non-being] is a hidden pattern; that we [i.e., all human beings] . . . are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art," Woolf remarks that this intuition

²⁹⁹ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 72. Italics mine.

³⁰⁰ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 72. Italics mine.

has certainly given its scale to my life ever since I saw the flower in the bed by the front door at St. Ives. If I were painting myself I should have to find some — rod, shall I say — something that would stand for the conception. It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me every day. *I prove this, now, by spending the morning writing*, when I might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes. *I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else.*³⁰¹

As these quotes illustrate, the mystical moments that Woolf experienced in her life and narrated in her work are intrinsically linked with writing,³⁰² for Woolf's moments of being go hand-in-hand with an inspiration to attempt to express and explain them.³⁰³ It follows, then, that writing is a medium by which Woolf ascertains greater knowledge about life, the events that comprise it, and their purpose. Woolf states that her capacity to receive the shocks of her moments of being makes her a writer, and reciprocally, it is through the act of writing that Woolf orders and examines these moments and, in doing so, comes to revelations of truth about life.³⁰⁴ Thus, the act of writing becomes central to the mystical experiences related and expressed in Woolf's work,³⁰⁵ enabling Woolf to convey the unity and sacrality that she perceives in "the hidden pattern" behind life, to make a unified whole of life's disparate elements.³⁰⁶

In this way, writing functions for Woolf in a manner that ties her closely to her modernist context. As discussed in chapter 2, certain modernist writers (including Woolf) broke with

³⁰¹ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 72-73. Italics mine.

³⁰² As Val Gough states, "[I]n 'A Sketch of the Past,' Woolf associate[s] the mystical moment of being with textuality" (Val Gough, "With Some Irony in Her Interrogation: Woolf's Ironic Mysticism," in *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins [New York: Pace University Press, 1997], 87).

³⁰³ Lazenby writes that, for Woolf, "the moment of vision and the inspiration to attempt expression stand side by side; their energies sourced in the same conviction of the presence of an underlying order: an order which, albeit fluctuating and elusive to [Woolf's] touch, simultaneously imbues and transcends the world around her (*A Mystical Philosophy*, 73).

³⁰⁴ Paulsell, "Writing and Mystical Experience," 264.

³⁰⁵ Paulsell, "Writing and Mystical Experience," 252.

³⁰⁶ Lazenby, *A Mystical Philosophy*, 73-74.

institutional religious belief and practice but nonetheless continued to seek new ways of accounting for and expressing a sense of the sacred in their work.³⁰⁷ This search for the sacred and a manner in which to express it contributed to the development of literary modernism as a movement because “the most important substitute for religion that the modernists found was literature itself.”³⁰⁸ The creation of literature thereby provided a means by which Woolf and other modernist writers could preserve and transmit the ecstatic, transcendent feelings of those experiences that bordered on the “religious.”³⁰⁹ But the literature that they created and the transcendent moments that they described therein were concerned not with the otherworldly beings or concepts present in institutional religion. Rather, their literary work focused on “the natural universe of ordinary things,”³¹⁰ and the transcendence they described entailed “experiences that originated in the ordinary world, not the supernatural, but that opened some sort of insight beyond the realm of the ordinary,” thereby creating “a secular sacred, a form of transcendent or ultimate meaning to be discovered in this world.”³¹¹

This is especially true of Woolf’s work. As touched upon in chapter 2 and illustrated in greater degree in chapter 4, Woolf was chief among those modernist writers who “sought to retain and amplify a world of ordinary experience and everyday things.”³¹² She was a writer whose own life experiences alerted her to the way in which the ordinary and everyday held the possibility of the extraordinary and remarkable,³¹³ and her fiction and nonfiction demonstrates the interrelation between the ordinary, the extraordinary, and a sense of the everyday sacrality that exists in and behind all life. The ordinary world, as Woolf describes it throughout her

³⁰⁷ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 24.

³⁰⁸ Lewis, “Religion,” 20.

³⁰⁹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 155.

³¹⁰ Kearney, “Sacramental Imagination,” 205.

³¹¹ Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, 20-21.

³¹² Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Cotton Wool of Daily Life,’” 47.

³¹³ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 13.

oeuvre, is the place where humans find communion among themselves and come to better understandings of themselves and the world, and thus the ordinary world stands as a place of refuge and wholeness “in opposition to all that threatens to . . . dominate, coerce, and destroy individuals and communities.”³¹⁴ It is perhaps for this reason that Woolf’s narration of Mrs. Ramsay’s experience in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* and Woolf’s descriptions of her own moments of being in “A Sketch of the Past” link the ordinary and everyday world with unitive experiences that resonate with sacrality.

A recognition of the importance of the ordinary and everyday to Woolf’s writing can provide important insights into her work, and an acknowledgment of the way that the extraordinary and ecstatic in Woolf’s work often derives from the ordinary and everyday can provide intriguing views into the concerns that Woolf’s writing addresses, but such simple recognitions and acknowledgments leave many unaddressed questions about Woolf’s perception of the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The nature and purpose of my study has required that I focus on only one way of investigating parts of Woolf’s work — namely, by using William James’s views of religion/religious experience and mysticism/mystical experience to analyze extraordinary moments in Woolf’s fiction and nonfiction — but it is a way that has particular value and that should be explored in greater depth. Further exploration would benefit not only literary studies of Woolf and her work but also studies that seek to examine the concepts of “religion” and “religious experience.” Consider, for instance, the following comment Ann Taves makes concerning James’s work in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Comparison between religious and nonreligious phenomena is crucial for the construction of theories of religion. . . . Openness to considering contested phenomena, such as the unusual experience studied by James, and openness to comparing experiences understood as religious with experiences understood as nonreligious . . .

³¹⁴ Sim, *Virginia Woolf*, 199.

allows us to explore the construction (and deconstruction) of religious experiences and thus the construction and deconstruction of religion as a category.³¹⁵

My primary contention throughout this project has been that James's conceptions of religion and mysticism can be effectively used to study the works of the nonreligious and atheistic Woolf. If my arguments have proven persuasive and compelling, my work opens the door to further inquiry into matters such as those raised by Taves. How might the points I have raised about the relationship between James's work on religion and Woolf's literary work factor into conceptions and definitions of religion and religious experience? What might be the broader effects of conceding that James's work on religion and on the traditionally religious category of mysticism can be used to glean further insights into the experiences described and narrated in Woolf's fictional and nonfictional work? What criteria does any person or culture use to delimit religion as a category, and in what ways can a study of nonreligious feelings, acts, experiences, and expressions demand a reexamination of the criteria used and, ultimately, of the conception of religion that these criteria create?

The issues raised by questions such as these are important because they trace their origins to a more foundational matter — namely, what it means to categorize certain facets of human experience as religious, nonreligious, or otherwise. Such an inquiry then leads to a further issue concerning the consequences of categorizing human experience as religious, nonreligious, or something in-between. Throughout this project, as I have proposed that a sense of the sacred persists in the work of the atheistic Woolf and have argued that this sense of the sacred is rooted in everyday experience and the ordinary world, my primary aim has been to defend these contentions by claiming, as James suggests in *Varieties*, that the sacred (what

³¹⁵ Ann Taves, "The Fragmentation of Consciousness and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*," in *William James and a Science of Religion: Reexperiencing The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 64.

James calls the “divine”) need not be conflated with God (or the gods) or with any organized or institutional forms of religious belief or practice. At the same time, I recognize that certain features that inform Woolf’s sense of the sacred are found in organized and institutional forms of religion. Hence, I return to a fundamental question: In what ways is the sense of the sacred found in Woolf’s work “religious,” and in what ways is it “nonreligious”?

In order to briefly expand upon this point, take, for example, a few of the most basic and evident similarities that exist between the Christian celebration of the eucharistic meal and the meal in which Mrs. Ramsay participates (and during which she has her mystical experience) in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse*.³¹⁶ At both meals, people gather with one another in social unity. At the eucharist, participants come together as a unified community of believers, “the Body of Christ”³¹⁷; in the dinner scene of *To the Lighthouse*, the guests make a singular “party” together. At both meals, there is a figure of authority who presides over the meal — the priest (acting as Christ’s representative) at the altar and Mrs. Ramsay at the head of the table³¹⁸ — and food is distributed to and consumed by those who have presented themselves for the occasion. At the end of both meals, the solemnity of the gathering is broken, and those who partook in it go their separate ways, return to the tasks and responsibilities of daily life, and the event becomes, to use Woolf’s description, “already the past.”

A fundamental factor, then, that seems to make the eucharistic meal “religious” and the dinner scene of *To the Lighthouse* “nonreligious” is the extent to which each event is connected to or associated with supernatural or otherworldly concepts (including God) and with the

³¹⁶ See Kearney’s “Eucharistic Imaginings” and “Sacramental Imagination” for fuller analyses of this example.

³¹⁷ See 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

³¹⁸ The dinner scene in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse* is, per Kearney, the “eschatological feast” in which the “messianic Mrs. Ramsay” unites her guests in “eucharistic communion” (“Eucharistic Imaginings,” 25).

institutional practices pertaining to those concepts. The eucharist is a celebration in which participants remember the death of Christ and receive the body and blood of Christ,³¹⁹ Christ being the Son of God and one of the three “Persons” in the triune God, according to Christian thought. The dinner scene that Woolf narrates in chapter 17 of *To the Lighthouse*, conversely, makes no reference to God or to otherworldly concepts, has no relation to organized or institutional religious practice (despite the basic similarities it bears to at least one such practice), and is presented simply as a dinner shared between guests — perhaps a special dinner, but a dinner lacking any supernatural or otherworldly qualities or connections.

As I have aimed to illustrate, however, if one considers the remarks that James makes on religion and religious experience in *Varieties*, one may come to the realization that the categories of religion and religious experience do not neatly equate with any single type of subject, practice, or experience. That is, when one appreciates the fullness of what James means when he states that “religion” is founded upon people’s relation to the “divine,” one can see how the “divine” need not necessarily be a concept or idea founded in, practiced in, or experienced in organized religion, and it therefore becomes possible to recognize the “religious” nature of certain feelings, acts, and experiences that occur outside organized religious settings and practices, and/or that are expressed by one who explicitly rejects the doctrines or practices of institutional religion. The extent to which Woolf’s writings can be analyzed using James’s conceptions of religion and the traditionally religious category of mysticism serves to illustrate that any attempt to claim a specific set of feelings, acts, and experiences as “religious” to the exclusion of other sets of (“nonreligious”) feelings, acts, and experiences is to oversimplify the complexity of the various ways that humans feel and act in their lives and the manner in which

³¹⁹ See 1 Corinthians 11:23-27.

they express themselves as they do. And if Taves is correct in her claim that comparison of religious and nonreligious phenomena is necessary for the construction of theories of religion, then such oversimplification becomes detrimental to the study of religion itself.

I hope that the arguments that I have made in this project and the evidence that I have provided in support of my contentions will facilitate further research into questions related to the manner in which scholars construct categories of religion and nonreligion and the ways in which certain beliefs, practices, and expressions fall into and in-between these categories. I hope that this goal would appeal to Woolf, who, by her own description, had “some restless searcher in [her],” who always asked the biggest questions and often left open their answers.³²⁰ And I hope that this goal would likewise appeal to James, who, throughout *Varieties*, realizes the limitations of his own scholarly study of phenomena related to religion. Regardless, in the end, both Woolf and James agree that any attempt to fully understand life and its experiences, as concepts and occurrences, comprised of thoughts, feelings, actions, and beliefs, whether religious or nonreligious or otherwise, ultimately misses the mark for the simple reason that life transcends anything easily demarcated and comprehensible. As Woolf states in “A Sketch of the Past,” “[O]ne’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does.”³²¹ As James declares in *Varieties*, “Apart from all religious considerations, there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of.”³²²

³²⁰ “I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on & say ‘This is it?’ . . . What is it? And shall I die before I find it?” (Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, ed. Anne Olivier Bell [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980], 62).

³²¹ Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” 73.

³²² James, *Varieties*, 387.

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