

Reflections on Danilyn Rutherford's "The Enchantments of Secular Belief"

In 1896, William James delivered a lecture to students from the philosophy clubs of Yale and Brown. Entitled "The Will to Believe," the address would become one of the signature statements of James's characteristic outlook on the conduct of life in general and religion in particular. "No bell in us tolls," said James, "to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp." That being the case, ideas generally come in the form of hypotheses that, like an electrical wire, are either "dead" or "live" possibilities for a given person. "Deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker," and James measured the significance of the hypothesis by the thinker's "willingness to act" upon it. Hence, James emphasized that "there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all." Belief, in short, was intrinsic to action in the world. The preceding year, James had summarized the interconnection of belief and action in an address to the Harvard YMCA:

It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true*. . . . You make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust, --both universes having been only *maybes*, in this particular, before you contributed your act.

In her essay, "The Enchantments of Secular Belief," Professor Danilyn Rutherford travels a path of reflection that intersects William James at several points. Rutherford launches her meditation about belief's pragmatic consequences by recalling a comment made by an emigrant from western New Guinea now living in the Netherlands, Betty Kaisiepo: "If we didn't believe in the impossible, we'd never get anything done." Kaisiepo's emphatic connection of belief to behavior prompts Rutherford to question the

skeptical stance of current anthropological writing toward the category *belief*. “We anthropologists,” Rutherford announces, “need to stop worrying about the relationship between belief and action and start seeing belief *as* action. We need to start attending to practices of belief.” In her essay as a whole, Rutherford therefore aims “to interrogate the relationship between belief and getting things done,” not only in New Guinea but also “closer to our scholarly homes” in the modern research university. William James would be pleased.

Both Rutherford and James recognize the force of David Hume’s view (summarized by Rutherford) that thinking is “an impassioned kind of doing,” that one’s perspective on the world is inevitably shaped by predispositions and interests. As James put it, “there are passional tendencies and volitions which run before” belief, and “our passional nature” prompts active belief in an hypothesis, judged in terms of its practical consequences or “what it leads to.” Rutherford advances James’s argument by demonstrating, from the New Guinea case study, the ways in which such “passional tendencies” are socially constituted. But James and Rutherford appear to agree that belief—as hypothesis about the way the world works—prompts work in the world.

Importantly, however, Betty Kaisiepo’s interview comment was not simply “if we didn’t believe, we’d never get anything done.” Instead, Rutherford’s field notes record the statement: “If we didn’t believe *in the impossible*, we’d never get anything done.” That business of “impossibility” would seem to draw the conversation into the realm of religion. And Rutherford most powerfully evokes the link between belief and impossibility through her account of a radio commentary by a recreational supervisor from Sacramento, Becky Herz. Ms. Herz, one learns, has a husband serving with the

military in Iraq, and she unwaveringly believes that she will speak with her husband on the telephone this evening, and the next evening, and the next. As Rutherford comments about Herz's radio message, "the prediction voiced in the opening sentence—'I'll talk to my husband later'—turned out to *be* the belief."

The contrast between Herz's conviction that the phone will ring and James's assertion about "the will to believe" marks a crucial feature of belief as a dimension of religion. James had asked his reader to imagine that alternative "possible universes" lay in the future and that the reader's action was indispensable in making one or the other a reality. Without a human actor, *the possible* would remain *impossibility*. This is one way to interpret the affirmation by Betty Kaisiepo: "If we didn't believe in the impossible, we'd never get anything done."

But Becky Herz's conviction that her soldier husband will telephone opens an alternative reading from the one suggested by William James. In Herz's case, the crucial point is that her agency has no effect on whether her husband will live to call this evening. The connotations of the word *belief*, as used by Herz, are quite different from James's equation of belief with hypothesis. Her husband, as the current president of the United States frequently puts it, is "in harms way," and the outcome of his day has nothing to do with Becky Herz's "will to believe." Instead, Herz's case reminds me of an early point in Rutherford's essay, when she comments in passing that "another term for 'belief'" is faith. Among the several connotations of faith, Herz seems closest to *trust*, confidence, that in a world in which much that is of paramount importance lies beyond the influence of human agency, it nonetheless is *possible* and not *impossible* to live one's life.

Historically, debate about the relationship between these two connotations of belief has profoundly shaped the character of religions as ways of life. Belief in James's sense of "our faith beforehand in an uncertified result" is generative of human action. But the story of Becky Herz reminds that, prior to "the will to believe," persons may also exhibit a confidence in the workings of life that are beyond human agency but that are the conditions of its possibility. Here, too, "If we didn't believe in the impossible, we'd never get anything done."

W. Clark Gilpin