



As a psychologist interested in the integration of psychology and religion, I decided to read the classic work in this area, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In this work, James, one of the greatest American psychologists, describes and contrasts two types of religious styles or characteristic ways of experiencing one's religion. The first style he describes as a religious person who has "the tendency to view things optimistically." According to James, a person characterized by this style deals with the pain, death, and meaningfulness of life by "setting his scores with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart." By contrast, the other style of religious experience James describes is characterized by "the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence." This person is acutely aware of the evil in the world and the meaningfulness so pervasive in our lives. Obviously, these styles have very different views of each other. According to James, the more melancholy style views the optimistic style as "blind and shallow" whereas the melancholy style is seen by the other as sick or "diseased."

James' contrast of styles resonated with me because I identified with the more "melancholy" type of James's dichotomy. I have often felt that when I shared intimately with people concerning my spiritual journey they perceived that there was something "wrong" with me, although no one ever dared label my spiritual life as "diseased." And yet, despite the reactions I received, I felt I had a very

strong and dynamic spiritual walk. I just experienced my relationship with God in a different way. However, the more I shared, the more I found others who identified with me. Once, when I shared my spiritual experience with an adult class at church, Darryl Tippens, the leader of the class, shared with me the name of an author and his book, Martin Marty's *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*, who labeled these styles as "Summer" and "Winter" Christians.

SUMMER AND WINTER CHRISTIANS

Although I have not read Marty's book, the terms "Winter" and "Summer" Christian resonated with me. Immediately, some of my longstanding but loosely associated ideas and reflections snapped into place. On my own, I began to describe these styles in some detail. My data set was simply all the people I had ever met who had shared their faith story with me. What follows are my personal thoughts on the Summer versus Winter Christian distinction and some of the implications this distinction might have for church life.

To describe these two styles I want to make a series of contrasts. Obviously, by making these contrasts it will seem that the distinction is either/or with no one falling in between. That is not the case and I will, after making these contrasts, offer some clarifications. However, starting with contrasts is useful in distinguishing the Summer and Winter types.

For my first contrast, I have selected what I think are prototypical scriptures which sum up the experience of the Summer and Winter Christian. For the Summer Christian I have selected Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." This verse captures the upbeat optimism of the Summer Christian; it also captures their experience of victory and deliverance.

For the Winter Christian I have selected Job 13:15: "Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him." Although I have seen Philippians 4:13 on many a poster, T-shirt, and bumper sticker, I have never seen "Though He slay me, yet will I hope

in Him" on a coffee mug. The verse is odd in that it casts relationship with God as almost antagonistic in nature. Yet, this verse captures so well the experience of the Winter Christian. To clarify, I think these verses provide a contrast as to the object of the Christian's struggle. In Philippians 4:13 the implied object of struggle is the World and God is seen as a source of support in our struggles with the World. For the Winter Christian, as seen in Job 13:15, the object of struggle is with God Himself. This is not to say that Winter Christians do not see or engage in the spiritual warfare around them, rather it is to say that much of their spiritual journey involves struggling directly with God. If I had to give a motto for the Summer and Winter Christians I would use the motto "Walking with God" for the Summer Christian experience and the motto "Wrestling with God" for the Winter Christian experience. To further make this contrast, if I had to select a Biblical moment to describe the Summer and Winter Christian experiences, for the Summer Christian I would select David's joyous dance before the Ark of the Covenant as it returned to Jerusalem. This scene seems to capture the joy and rapture in the presence of God that Summer Christians so often (but not always as I will clarify later) feel. By contrast, the Winter Christian experience seems best captured by Jacob's evening long struggle with God. It should be clear now that Winter Christians would see Jacob's wrestling with God and walking away from that struggle a wounded person as a metaphor for their faith experience.

A second contrast between Summer and Winter Christians regards their prayer experiences. For the most part, I would characterize Summer Christians as "prayer warriors." This follows from what I have just said in that, through prayer, Summer Christians have a powerful connection with God's power to do battle with the spiritual forces of Evil. Winter Christians have a different experience in prayer. Gethsemane is the model for Winter Christian prayer. Winter Christians do not often engage in peti-

tionary prayer. They are often uneasy with making requests of God (there are a variety of reasons for this). Rather, Winter Christians use prayer to confront and struggle with God. Prayer is the most common place where their "wrestling with God" occurs.

One reason Summer and Winter Christians differ in prayer experience is that they often view God's activity in the world in different ways. Summer Christians see God as very concerned with and involved in the details of our lives. Consequently, they may request signs or interventions from God in a variety of life circumstances from selling a house to deciding which school to send the kids to. Winter Christians struggle with such requests, but not because they believe that God doesn't care or cannot act. Rather, Winter Christians wonder if God has a specific will in each and every circumstance. The result, as I have mentioned, is that prayer becomes a struggle as Winter Christians wrestle with the very act of making certain petitions to God.

A third contrast involves the faith experience itself. Summer Christians have a sense of assurance and conviction whereas Winter Christians are more doubt-filled. In fact, doubt and uncertainty may be the central experience of the Winter Christian. However, do not mistake this as a lack of faith. Rather, for the Winter Christian faith cannot exist unless doubt is present. They are two sides of the same coin.

This difference in faith experience affects how Winter and Summer Christians view Bible study. For Summer Christians, the Bible is clear in its teachings and directives. Winter Christians, by contrast, find the Bible very perplexing. Summer Christians see the Bible as bedrock: if you dig you will eventually hit the foundations of Truth. Winter Christians see the Bible as an onion: the more layers you peel the more layers you find. These contrasting views of the Bible affect how we each judge an effective Bible class or sermon. Summer Christians feel that study should have resolution, answers, and applications. Winter Christians feel that study leads not to conclusions but to deeper and deeper questions.

Finally, Summer and Winter Christians differ in their emotional experiences. For the Summer Christian, joy and peace predominate. For the Winter Christian, their doubts and questions leave them uneasy. They experience joy but often against a background of sadness. This mix of positive and negative emotions is difficult to explain in words, but it seems to be a common experience for Winter Christians.

IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH WINTER CHRISTIANS?

After hearing the descriptions of Summer and Winter Christians some readers might be thinking, "Is there something wrong with the Winter Christians?" That is, can a spiritual journey characterized by wrestling with God and doubt be healthy? Aren't these people displaying a lack of faith? The answer is no. I personally know spiritual giants who are Summer Christians, and I know spiritual giants who are Winter Christians. Winter Christians are some of the most faith-filled people I know. It is only in the experience of faith where Summer and Winter Christians differ, not in the quantity or quality of faith. Yes, people in the midst of faith struggles will have Winter Christian characteristics. But you can tell the difference by their fruits. Winter Christians are not caught up in some existential crisis, they are active followers of Jesus Christ.

SITUATIONAL OR DISPOSITIONAL?

Is the Summer/Winter distinction a product of intrinsic differences among us (our dispositions) or the product of our life experiences? The answer is both. We all go through periods of summer and winter in our spiritual lives. Life events can also have lasting effects on our faith journey. I know many people who, after certain difficult life experiences, "became" Winter Christian in orientation. These people did not lose their faith, but their faith experience did change. Yet, despite the effects of life circumstance upon us, I do think there are intrinsic differences. Some of us seem to be more inclined to be Summer or Winter regardless of life circumstances.

IS IT REALLY EITHER/OR?

Can people really be classified as

either purely Summer or Winter? I doubt it. Yes, there may be "pure types" out there, but most of us are complex mixes of the two. So, for fun, here is a continuum:

Summer—Spring (mostly Summer with a touch of Winter)—Fall (mostly Winter with a touch of Summer)—Winter. I think most of the people I know are somewhere in the middle: Spring and Fall Christians.

IMPLICATIONS

There is something fun about thinking about and classifying ourselves, family and friends as either Summer or Winter. However, if this is all we did it would be an entertaining but largely useless exercise. I had a deeper goal in mind in offering these descriptions. I wanted to make this distinction because I see many ways in which an understanding of the diversity among us could be put to good use.

First, for all you Winter Christians out there, you have a home at church. You are not alone and your faith walk is not abnormal or "diseased." Yes, churches can often seem like Summer resorts, but there are many Winter Christians who can identify and resonate with your spiritual journey. So open up and share. You have a community that understands you.

Second, Summer and Winter Christians may have married each other. Although you knew each other to be people of faith, little did you know that your experiences of faith would differ so markedly. I understand. Jana (my wife and a Summer Christian) and I (the Winter Christian) had a lot of things to work out in this regard during our early years of marriage. For one example, we often had trouble praying together as a couple. Our faith experience and, consequently, our prayer experiences, were so different that it was difficult to find common ground. To be blunt, we had trouble agreeing on the actual prayer requests. For instance, let's say a couple, one Summer the other Winter, were offered two job opportunities. Obviously, they would want to pray about this as a couple. Although the Summer Christian might pray for a sign from God as to which job to choose, the Winter Christian might not feel comfortable with that type of request and

want, rather, to spend the prayer time wrestling with God over the issue. Is anyone wrong in this instance? I don't think so. But these different faith experiences can be a source of tension and potential conflict in marriages. Beyond prayer, they might like different Bible classes, different churches, different small groups, and different worship styles. The list can get quite long. However, by understanding these differences and the spiritual styles that generate them, we can move toward accepting each other as having different but legitimate spiritual journeys. In the end we may be able to avoid a lot of misery and misunderstanding.

Thirdly, I see implications for church leaders and teachers. I have seen a lot of tension build in Bible classes when Winter and Summer Christians clash. I have seen Winter Christian teachers leave Summer Christian classes wholly unsatisfied. No answers were offered, no applications, just a lot of perplexing questions. I have also seen Summer Christian teach-

ers upset by Winter Christian questions that seem too off topic or philosophical. This tension is unfortunate. Teachers should realize that there is a diversity of faith experiences represented in their classes. A "one size fits all" lesson leaves a lot of people unsatisfied. A similar issue applies to church leaders. Spiritual counsel must be multifaceted and hit people where they live. Unreflective Winter Christian leaders may upset Summer Christian sheep and vice versa.

Finally, we are hearing people concerned about the postmodern age we are living in and how churches will reach a generation raised in this era. I think that Winter Christians are a part of our answer. The doubts and concerns that are raised by postmodern perspectives are familiar to Winter Christians. If anyone can speak to finding faith in a postmodern age, Winter Christians can. The testimony of Winter Christians may be the perfect weapon in our battle to connect with a postmodern culture.

CONCLUSION

The thing I think about the most when I contemplate the Summer and Winter Christian experiences is the need for honesty and acceptance in our churches. Over the years I have come to be convinced that there is great diversity among us. Each of us experiences God in wonderfully unique ways. Too often, however, we hide those experiences thinking others will find us odd or abnormal. To reduce this sense of alienation we need to become more transparent. But this will not happen until we create a climate of acceptance in our churches and stop expecting a "one size fits all" Christianity. We don't need a climate-controlled church where everyone is the same temperature. God is so much larger than any one faith experience. As individuals, we are only one part of the story, or, to keep with the metaphor, one among many seasons of faith.

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