

*The Varieties of Religious Experience*

William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*<sup>1</sup> was the result of twenty lectures given by the Harvard professor at the University of Edinburgh between 1901-1902. Shortly after the final lecture was delivered, James' post-script states that "the current of thought in academic circles runs against me," yet this text has since risen to capture the esteem of both psychologists and philosophers, and it remains a seminal volume on the psychology of religion and James' own philosophy of pragmatism.

James begins by stating his intention to study religious feelings and impulses rather than religious institutions, claiming as a psychologist that "the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution." Marking an early distinction between exotericism as existential and esotericism as spiritual, James embarks on a search for the "original experiences" that gave birth to the "imitated conduct" that we observe in today's religions. Importantly, James discusses the pathological aspects of religious adherents, and arrives at the "plain truth" that "to interpret religion, one must in the end look at the immediate content of the religious consciousness." For James, the fruits of the religious life must speak for themselves, and when they do, they attest to the value of the religious experience for such an individual but not necessarily for humanity considered more broadly.

James aligns with other teachers of divine philosophy when he recommends that students of religion act "as if" there were a God, as if humanity was free, as if nature were full of special designs, and to lay plans as if we were immortal. James states that "men come to regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as a proof of its truth" and uses the phrases once-born to indicate the healthy and unassailable optimist, and the "sick souls" of the twice-born for the

more experienced and cynical-minded members of humanity. Students of Thelema may be surprised to learn of Saint Augustine's maxim, "if you but love [God] you may do as you incline" which is strikingly similar to Aleister Crowley's "do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."

James speaks of mankind's dual nature, which he equates to a Venn diagram that partakes of both that which is above and below his state of evolution, thus forming an important bridge. The author proceeds to a discussion of religious conversion and cites many examples of the "crisis of self-surrender" and the metamorphosis that results in which a "man is born anew." A key factor in gauging the inner transformation of such a "born again" individual is the presence of a new degree of what James calls "saintliness." From this heightened state, James quotes Dr. W.R. Inge to say "that men of preeminent saintliness agree very closely in what they tell us...that God is a spirit with whom the human spirit can hold intercourse" and that "in proportion as they [people] come to themselves they come to him."

James turns his analysis next to mysticism, which includes states of mind that contain aspects of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. The "Anaesthetic Revelation" is next given ample treatment; a subject linked with nitrous oxide of which I had no previous knowledge, but which he quotes Benjamin Paul Blood as asserting contains the "open secret of being, revealed as the Inevitable Vortex of Continuity." James moves quickly through various Hindu concepts, such as "samadhi" and the four stages of "dhyana," and the "science of the [Islamic] Sufis." Interestingly, James states that such "marvels as levitation, stigmatization, and the healing of disease" have "no essential mystical significance, for they occur with no consciousness of illumination," which he asserts is the "essential mark of mystical states."

James next treats the subject of religion through his own philosophical analysis, stating that “feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products.” To drive this point home, James embarks on a swift but dense exposition of standard arguments for and against the philosophy of religion, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that “ratiocination is a relatively superficial and unreal path to the deity.” James then covers sacrifice, confession, and prayer as religion’s “most essential elements,” and notes that “in the process of communion energy from on high flows in to meet demand, and becomes operative within the phenomenal world.” It is this fact that James believes establishes the “reality” of religion. In the final analysis, James seems to believe that religion is useful in so far as it renders the adherents useful and happy, and he espouses a cautious subjectivity when considering the truth of religion and its effects on its members. In closing, James states of the reality of deity that, “Perhaps the best thing we can say of God is that he is the inevitable inference” and that “he is not known...[or] understood; he is used” by the faithful to become better individuals.

1. William, James. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Longmans, Green & Co., 1902.

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