

Varieties of Religious Experience

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"The Varieties of Religious Experience is certainly the most notable of all books in the field of the psychology of religion and probably destined to be the most influential [one] written on religion in the twentieth century", said Walter Houston Clark in *Psychology Today*. The book was an immediate bestseller upon its publication in June 1902. Reflecting the pluralistic views of psychologist-turned-philosopher William James, it posits that individual religious experiences, rather than the tenets of organized religions, form the backbone of religious life. James's discussion of conversion, repentance, mysticism, and hope of reward and fears of punishment in the hereafter--as well as his observations on the religious experiences of such diverse thinkers as Voltaire, Whitman, Emerson, Luther, Tolstoy, and others--all support his thesis. "James's characteristic humor, his ability to put down the pretentious and to be unpretentious, and his willingness to take some risks in his choices of anecdotal data or provocative theories are all apparent in the book", noted Professor Martin E. Marty. "A reader will come away with more reasons to raise new questions than to feel that old ones have been resolved".

"I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed. To the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution. It would seem, therefore, as a psychologist, the natural thing for me would be to invite you to a descriptive survey of those religious propensities."

When William James went to the University of Edinburgh in 1901 to deliver a series of lectures on "natural religion," he defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." Considering religion, then, not as it is defined by--or takes place in--the churches, but as it is felt in everyday life, he undertook a project that, upon completion, stands not only as one of the most important texts on psychology ever written, not only as a vitally serious contemplation of spirituality, but for many critics one of the best works of nonfiction written in the 20th century. Reading *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, it is easy to see why. Applying his analytic clarity to religious accounts from a variety of sources, James elaborates a pluralistic framework in which "the divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions." It's an intellectual call for serious religious tolerance--indeed, respect--the vitality of which has not diminished through the subsequent decades.

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