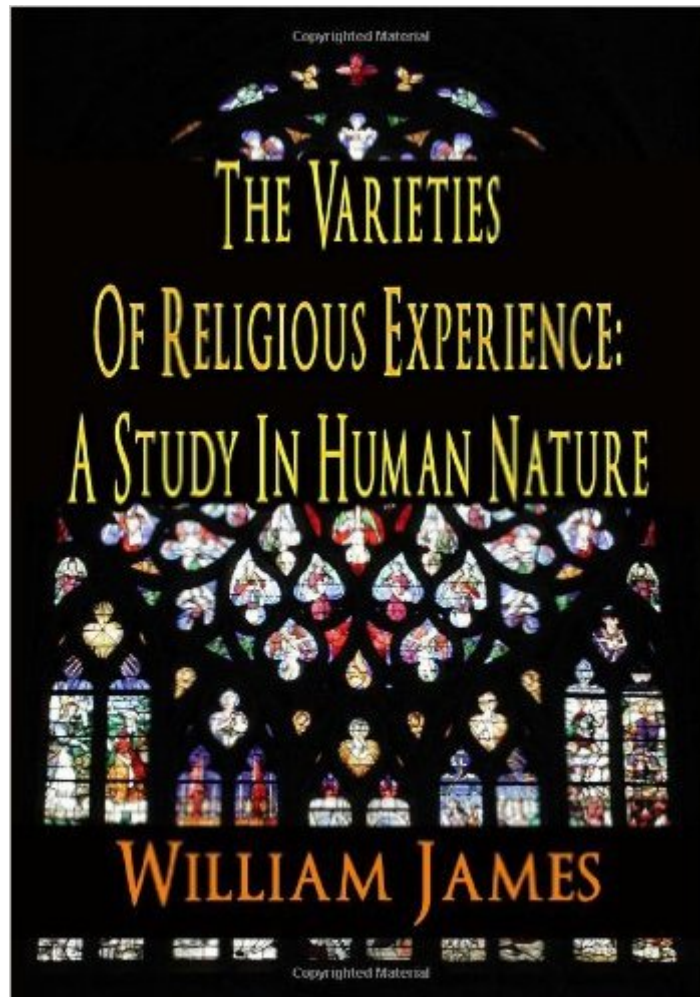


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The Varieties Of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature



Synopsis

The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature is a book by the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James comprising 20 lectures given at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. These lectures concerned the nature of religion and the neglect of science, in James' view, in the academic study of religion. Soon after its publication, the book found its way into the canon of psychology and philosophy, and has remained in print for over a century.

Book Information

Paperback: 284 pages

Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (November 9, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1439297274

ISBN-13: 978-1439297278

Product Dimensions: 7 x 0.7 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (157 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #93,293 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #149 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Religious

Customer Reviews

I am always surprised when I am cruising around and take a look at a classic and find just 1 or 2 customer comments on a book such as James's masterful "Varieties". So, I just had to say something. This is one of the greatest and most readable books ever written on the subject of religion. Don't be surprised at what you find. WJ is not making a "case" for belief here, or any case for any particular religious "system". He is studying religious experience, trying to get to the bottom of what brings it about and what it means for human beings. Thus, he pays little attention to what we call "organized religion." He spends his time, rather, with the various ways that people have experienced God or the supernatural or the spiritual. James's style is very subtle, ornate, and powerful. Just let yourself soak in it for awhile and then try to learn. His metaphors are so stunning as to be memorable for the rest of your life. His discussion of the healthy-minded, the sick soul, and the mystic will entrall you and thrill you with his erudition, and they will become touchstones in your own religious experience and your own study of religion for the rest of your life. Religion is a living reality for WJ. He gives a powerful analysis of what it can, should, and does mean to men and women in the modern world. If you wish to understand modern thought on religion, by the way, you

must read James, for much of it springs from his thought. Lastly, James is the kindest thinker who ever put pen to paper. For those of in the William James Society, this is why we love him so. He never chides or derides or condemns.

The previous reviews are very good descriptions of this book. I'd like to reiterate that it helps while reading to remember that this is primarily a study of many case histories of very personal and profound experiences with God. They are mostly in the form of excerpts from autobiographies and memoirs, mainly Christian and contemporary (the book was published in 1903), but many also from other times and faiths. There is no addressing the pros and cons of organized religion here, or, for that matter, of questions like whether miracles really happen, etc. This book is a microcosm, though. James touches on so many matters of religion and, indeed, life and philosophy overall that the book makes valuable reading for anyone interested in humans generally. He talks, of necessity, quite a bit about the subconscious, which had just recently been "invented," showing that profound religious experiences comes from there, though that doesn't mean that they're not of divine origin: perhaps it's our subconscious self that connects to God. James then analyzes these experiences from the pragmatic point of view of, Are these experiences healthy? What are their "fruits"? But there are no ultimate "Answers" of the kind you find suggested in other works of philosophy or theology. Despite some heady speculation towards the end, James sticks to the facts, and never expects his audience to accept anything unproven. Especially interesting, I thought, were the descriptions of "conversion," a two-fold experience consisting of spiritual crisis and of release from that crisis and the reaching of a profound state of surety and, usually, happiness.

You will not draw the nectar out of this book unless you are aware (the earlier the better) of James' premise that the stronghold of religion lies in individuality. These lectures are not a study of "religion" nor even a study of religious "experiences" in toto, but a study of "individual" religious experience. Singular. It sounds narrow only until you add the other word of the title... "varieties." Why such an emphasis upon the individual? Because, as James states, the pivot around which the religious life revolves "is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny." All proper "religion" by such a definition must consist in an individual experiencing connection with that which he considers to be the higher power(s). In fact, at one point James states that "prayer is real religion." And further, "Wherever this interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or of doctrines, we have living religion." A thought-provoking principle. You will never appease your hunger by staring at

a menu. You have to actually open your mouth and "experience" the eating of some food. Similarly, we can only learn about religious experience by recounting the experiences of those who've done some profound religious eating (so to say). This is James' method. He renounces the ambition to be coercive in his arguments (this is not an apologetic work) and simply focuses on "rehabilitating the element of feeling in religion and subordinating its intellectual part." He does this by the examination of diverse case histories.

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