
INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM JAMES (1842–1910) BEGAN teaching philosophy at Harvard College in 1879. He was appointed assistant professor of philosophy in 1880 and promoted to professor of philosophy in 1885. He was also appointed professor of psychology in 1889. He resigned his professorships in 1907. George Herbert Palmer, who was appointed instructor in philosophy in 1872, wrote a tribute to James in 1920 on the occasion of the publication of James's letters. Palmer had this to say about him:

Though he called his philosophy “Radical Empiricism” and liked to try how complete a world might be constructed by ingenious manipulation of material elements, yet to the last he kept ample room in his empiric universe for spiritual forces. Man is free. An approachable God exists, reverence for whom is the beginning of wisdom, and religion the most urgent of human concerns. He himself was a peculiarly devout man, and though living at a distance, liked to begin his day with the service at Appleton Chapel.¹

This is a book on William James's understanding of the religious life. It focuses especially on his classic text *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which was originally published in 1902.² But several lesser known essays are also drawn upon in order to expand on central themes in *The Varieties*. In this book I emphasize James's claim that *The Varieties* is, according to its subtitle, “a study in human nature,” and that for James a fundamental feature of human nature is that we possess a conscious and a subconscious mind and that the subconscious mind is deeply implicated in the religious life.

We tend to associate the subconscious mind with Sigmund Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition, but James also emphasized the influence of

1. Simon, *William James Remembered*, 35. Appleton Chapel is Harvard University's chapel.

2. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

our subconscious mind on our mental and emotional processes. He thought of the conscious mind as the center of the mind, and the subconscious mind as the mind's outer margins. The image that expresses what he had in mind is a circle within a larger circle. He also viewed the subconscious mind as the place or locus where religious ideas and emotions incubate and then, when circumstances permit, gain entrance into the conscious mind. In effect, the subconscious region of the mind is the soil in which religious ideas and emotions germinate.

As Palmer indicates, James kept ample room in his empiric universe for spiritual forces. He did so by suggesting that there is a spiritual world that exists outside the mind but that informs and even invades the mind, typically by gaining entry into the subconscious mind at least initially. He begins lecture 3 of *The Varieties*—"The Reality of the Unseen"—with this observation:

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.³

James notes that "all of our attitudes, moral, practical, or emotional, as well as religious, are due to the 'objects' of our consciousness, the things which we believe to exist, whether really or ideally, along with ourselves."⁴ These "objects" may be present to our senses or only to our thought, but in either case they elicit from us a reaction, and our reaction may be as strong or stronger when the object is only in our thought and not available to our sense perceptions. In general, the more concrete objects of most persons' religion—the God or gods in which they believe—are known to them only in idea. Although some persons have testified to their having seen the object of their belief—face-to-face, as it were—religion is primarily based on the belief or conviction that an unseen world exists outside the human mind, both individually and collectively. And although this belief or conviction can take the form of an abstract idea, it is more likely to manifest "a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there.'"⁵

In his concluding lecture in *The Varieties* James speaks of this sense of reality and feeling of objective presence as something "more," which is

3. *Ibid.*, 53.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 58.

operative in the universe outside of oneself. James proposes as a hypothesis “that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.”⁶ Clearly, the “more” exists independently of our own thoughts and emotions, but the very purpose of religion is to enable us to feel ourselves “connected” with it. As Palmer notes, for James “an approachable God exists.” Moreover, an approachable God exists for James because he understands God to be the initiator as well as the object of approach. The religious life then is one in which we “keep in working touch” with the spiritual world that surrounds and embraces us.

Now, a word about the contents of this book: Chapter 1 provides a brief summary of the contents of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and a biography of its author focusing primarily on his professional career. Chapter 2 is concerned with James’s emphasis in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on personal not institutional forms and expressions of religion. It cites several examples of the religious experiences of individuals whom James either knows or has read about to illustrate what he means by personal religion. Chapter 3 focuses on James’s chapter called “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness,” which emphasizes the growing influence of the mind-cure movement especially in the United States. Chapter 4 is concerned with James’s chapter on “The Sick Soul.” It takes particular note of James’s view that melancholy is the worst form of soul-sickness and considers his own experience of melancholy, which he presents anonymously in the chapter. Chapter 5 introduces James’s view of religion as implicated in the experience of division within oneself but also as a resource in the resolution of this sense of inner division. Chapter 6 is concerned with James’s lecture on religious conversion and his use of psychological theories to understand the inner workings of conversion. Chapter 7, on the saintly character, draws on three of James’s lectures on saintliness and focuses on his suggestion that the saintly character is a person for whom spiritual emotions are the habitual center of one’s personal energy, and that there is “a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions, of which the features can easily be traced.”⁷ Chapter 8 concerns James’s lecture on other characteristics of religion and his emphasis in this lecture on prayer, or what he calls “the prayerful consciousness.” The chapter shows that James placed particular emphasis on prayer as the religious experience that facili-

6. Ibid., 508, 512. In his answers to a questionnaire prepared by James Bissett Pratt, James said that “Religion means primarily a universe of spiritual relations surrounding the earthly practical ones, not merely relations of ‘value,’ but agencies and their activities.” James, *Writings 1902–1910*, 1183.

7. Ibid., 271.

tates the connection between the human mind and the spiritual world that surrounds us.

The three relatively brief chapters in Part 2 pick up on several prominent themes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Chapter 9 focuses on James's interest in the clergyman Ansel Bourne, who experienced himself as two different persons, and on James's efforts to help him via hypnosis to reconcile his dual selves. This case has clear associations with James's discussion in *The Varieties* of the divided self and of the role of religion in the process of unification. Chapter 10 centers on James's identification of the clergyman Phillips Brooks as exemplary of a "spiritual person" and suggests that what James recognized and celebrated in Brooks was his emphasis on the inner resources that are available to us in our personal and collective struggles with the difficulties and problems of life. Finally, chapter 11 concerns James's suggestion in *Pragmatism* that what fundamentally distinguishes the religious view of life from the views expressed in materialism and in narrow understandings of science is that life on this earth is fundamentally hopeful.⁸ This chapter suggests that the death of James's son Herman played an important role in James's own assurance of the truth of the religious life.

This book does not cover all the topics that James discusses in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The topics of mysticism (to which he devoted two lectures) is not discussed, and philosophy (to which he devoted a single lecture) is considered only as it impinges on other topics. Also, the chapter on the saintly character deals with his first chapter on saintliness but not the second. His final chapter—"Conclusions"—and postscript are not discussed either.

Thus, the book does not present *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in a comprehensive way. However, my hope is that it provides the reader with a clear and compelling sense of James's understanding of the religious life, one that I believe is as relevant today as it was at the turn of the twentieth century. Of course, James's discussion and references reflect the social and cultural realities of his own day, and he uses theories and concepts, especially psychological, that were current at the time. But the manner in which he addresses and explores the religious life and especially what makes a person religious is as insightful today as it was in his own day. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is considered a classic in the broad field of religious studies and more focally in the psychological study of religion. What makes a book a classic, I believe, is that it invites its readers to enter into the text in a way that is personally meaningful to them. Moreover, it *remains* a classic

8. James, *Pragmatism*, 49.

because its readers over the course of their own lives discover new ways in which the book is personally meaningful to them. It is my hope that this book will serve as an invitation to readers to discover that the book is, in this sense, a classic for them.

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