

The Nature of Religious Experience in the Philosophy of William James

By

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Abstract

William James (1842-1910) was both a psychologist and philosopher who has attained international reputation as America's most original thinker. He aroused a public interest in philosophy in general, and pragmatism in particular. James rejected intellectualizing and theorizing about religion in favor of an empirical approach and his task became that of articulating the way in which experience may justify religious beliefs. He was a pluralist in love with variety and with his own religious experience.

James's interest in religion was in personal terms. The meaning and importance of his religious writings can properly be understood only in the light of his belief that the most fruitful approach to religion is an empirical one. His pragmatic justification for religious belief has often been challenged, on both ontological and moral grounds. Critics argue that James's accounts of religious truth and its justification are perniciously subjective. Nevertheless, once James's conceptions of religious truth and justification are understood in their full measure of depth, this charge can be

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seen as misplaced. In this article, I explore James's philosophy of religion in a way that enables his views to be understood and critiqued.

Introduction

In order to define the nature of religious experience, we should first establish what religion is and what is experience. The word *religion* does not stand for any single principle or entity, and religion has many characters which may in turn be equally important. Philosophers have various views on '*religion*', for example, Karl Marx (1818-1883), describes religion as an ideological weapon of the ruling class which has a function that is harmful. John Dewey (1859-1952) finds that religion has a valuable function in life. Therefore, any singular abstract conception is misleading.

Instead of being seduced into the theorizing fallacy of seeking a definition as the key to the nature of religion, one should inquire into its various meanings in human experience. Hence, religion has its external aspects, worship, sacrifice, theology, ceremonies, and ecclesiastical organizations. It is also, in a more personal way, the inner dispositions "which form the center of his interest, his conscience, his helplessness, and his incompleteness" (James, 1958, p. 28). Nevertheless, one might argue that religion is not religion but a

psychological manifestation, according to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud sees religion as a form of wish-fulfillment, and the dogmas of religion are illusions derived from deep and persistent wishes.

James's Concept of Religion

James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, generally considers religion only in its personal aspect, believing that this is more fundamental than theological: "Churches, when once established, live at second hand upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mohammed, but all the originators of religious sects have been in this case; so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete" (James, 1958, p. 30).

The meaning of religion, as one should generally understand it throughout James's writings, is described in the *Varieties* in the following practical terms: "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *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*. Since the relation may be