

Notes On Varieties of Religious Experience

by William James

1.

I have found a profound new breath within the work of the lectures of William James. I'm unsure how I came across this book of lectures but I suppose it was the title alone that sparked my interest in it. I have found that it far surpasses my initial expectations and renewed my sense of surprise. I would acknowledge this book of lectures as the best read I have had in months, possibly the best read of this year thus far. I am not nearly finished with it, but having taken many notes already and hitting a decent mark in the book I thought it would be best to break up my writing into several parts.

In some way, most sacred things are merely gifts which were awarded for some kind of pure action. For patience or honesty or intention or time. For all of those things we are rewarded with fruits of different kinds. We carry these elements with us in such a deeply personal way that it is impossible to determine them unnecessary. To treat religion as something important but inherently disconnected from the origin of personal experience is an idea which attracts criticism from both the zealots and the academics who hold themselves above religion entirely. For those who believe and for those who disbelieve it is easier to contain the heart of religion within the borders of what has manifested. What has history and what merely is. The church and the temple, the holy books and sacred peoples, and altogether the union of those things and more to create a name and a guideline. In Varieties of Religious Experience there lies something of a clean and honest representation of religious experience as a contact with the divine on the personal level. The definition of divine is also explained as something supernatural and beyond the realm of which we can understand with measurable tools. The setting and context of the lectures in the book are to me another interesting element. The lectures take place at a university in Scotland where the famous psychology professor creates a unique world for religion to be understood. Away from the grips of the modern critics, many of whom were intellectual atheists, and even further away from religious dogma which confines religion as something which requires community to function and in many ways punishes those who escape from the realm of titles and exactness.

In the first lectures William James speaks about the validity of personal religious experience and the possibility to treat faith and belief as something genuine despite the inability to measure them. The tone of the writing is mostly pragmatic and the message of the first lectures is objective despite occasionally leaning into astonishment and surprise of the strength that religion has to change and transform the individual. The crystal in the darkness for me is the personal. The deeply personal connection to the divine which we have yet to allow to grow independent of systems made to confine the spirit. William James speaks about the profiles of different kinds of people, the temperaments (which we would now simply say personalities) of people and how that may change their perspective on faith and divinity entirely. The special profile of the eccentric believer is that of many complex and opposing forces. A mind that can appear meek and balanced alongside an acceptance of death and crucifixion. This acceptance of pain is especially clear in those who are of that eccentric type. The saints and prophets and types in that general plane can be moved to accept a painful fate, a purging of who they are in society, a rejection of their desperate pleas and even the tearing down of the flesh they bore, all in an alien silence which appears unattainable for the majority of people.

2.

There are many excerpts in the lectures which represent different perspectives on the lives of religious people. Reading the many excerpts a few notes appeared in my mind. Personal religion seems to splinter off into different lanes depending on the personality of the people who are involved. Those who require faith to deliver them, to free them from their first birth into the world- "born again"'s are somewhat common in the world. Faith and religion serve a purpose which lifts the burden of blame on any one person, something which opens their eyes to a more profound realm. In my experience these kinds of personalities commonly have a somewhat reduced perspective on good, and especially on the purpose of evil and the existence of heavens. William James mentions a habit of reducing the world to being all-good and without evil entirely, if evil does exist in this kind of archetype it refuses it and often attempts to manifest good from evil. "Everything happens for a reason" is a common response from this kind of religious person, in incapability of accepting darkness and unknowing.

Another kind is the archetype which hardly fits into any clean category, they are much more rare in life as they often abandon society in order to be closer with their personal religion and faith. Large sacrifices come from their drive to be unified entirely, even the sacrifice of flesh. So many of these kinds have accepted a reality of silence, starvation, darkness and rejection of the self to ascend. An excerpt from Tolstoy speaks about his rejection of life and his struggle to live in harmony.

This kind of religious experience seems somewhat caught between euphoria and psychosis, and possibly that is the only way to experience such an emotion, to be walking the lines of the mind, aware of a strange insanity pulling you into a new chamber. The time and intention rewarded.

Is this a delusion of the mind? Or is this the ultimate sign of divinity as Weil saw? The acceptance of crucifixion and the death of self as the highest transcendence. If this is the greatest achievement, one has to wonder what the greater purpose is. If the only way through the ego is the dream of death then we must come to face an uncomfortable truth, that the world is built up of principles incompatible with the understanding of the flesh, that exist now only in the ignorance of comfort. At least this is what many eccentrics have thought on their wayward journey to the cross.

For these rare kinds the opposing sides of extremity, near insanity and religious lucidity should contradict each other, but the reality is that for this special kind of person submission appears most important. To reject the self and crucify the ego, to tear at the flesh and allow yourself no escape from the awareness of solitary confinement is the ultimate form of submission and acceptance. If that were the goal, the person would require a specific type of perspective on their reality. Paradoxes work in the favor of the fruit they work for, the lust for a righteous death and an honest freedom paved by the weeping of the human which works on behalf of the emancipation of the spirit.

3.

The lectures thus far aim to take religious experience in a different light from that which has been taken before. To take it as a unique psychological experience which can yield results to the lives of those who engage with it. But to me there is an even greater purpose in the lectures which was possibly not intended. The purpose of giving room for the strange on their path to a personal death, a personal freedom, and a personal heaven. Something which cannot be explained entirely to another, and something which cannot be taken away or expressed by any concrete form of language or structure. To speak for the seed before the trees and the rush trickling up before our wave.

Our figure who sees god in shades unknown.