

William James

William James (1842-1910) was a prominent American philosopher and psychologist who made a substantial contribution to the study of religion. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) he developed an empirical and scientific approach to religion. This meant, first, that there is no essence of religion, for religious phenomena are irreducibly diverse. However, this approach also meant distinguishing the central aspect of religion from the peripheral aspects. For James, the central aspect is what he called "personal religion," which is the feelings and acts of individuals as they experience themselves in relation to what they understand to be divine. The peripheral aspect consists of the institutional and doctrinal sides of religion, which, in James' conception, are rooted in personal religion and, as its residual effects, are definitely secondary to it. They emerge when the experiences of deeply religious individuals (such as the founders of religious traditions) are translated into forms that are more accessible to people with less profound experiences. As a result, religious institutions and doctrines are valid only in so far as they are expressions and interpretations of personal religion.

Besides his contribution to the empirical study of religion, James wrote substantially on the topic of belief (especially in *The Will to Believe* [1897]). James sought to defend the propriety of religious belief in the face of rationalists who insisted that belief should always be withheld whenever the available evidence is not fully compelling. In response, James argued that in religion we are faced with options that are forced and momentous. They are forced because there is no possibility of not choosing (since withholding belief is equivalent to unbelief). They are momentous because they bear on the things that are most significant to human existence. Additionally, James noted, our beliefs do not rest upon evidence and logic alone. He asserted that our "passional nature" plays an important and valid role in belief-formation. Consequently, we are epistemologically justified in believing in God once the demands of our passional nature are taken into account.

James' own theology was in keeping with his pragmatic theology. Although he believed in the existence of divine being, he held that such belief is important and valid because it best accords with the rest of our beliefs and best helps us make sense of the totality of our experience. In other words, we accept belief in God as true because it promotes the good life of ethical activity, hope, and intellectual coherence.

James, William. *The Meaning of Truth. The Works of William James*. 18 volumes. Frederick Burkhardt, General Editor. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975.

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