



## The Varieties of Religious Experience

by William James (1842 - 1910)

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*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* by William James is an edited collection of the Gifford Lectures on natural theology delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland in 1901 and 1902. James examined religion from the perspectives of his training in medicine, chemistry, psychology, and philosophy to try to give some scientific grounding to the abstractions that underpin the descriptions of much spiritual experience. In reviewing many case histories of religious inspiration he concluded that the existence of an unseen reality was highly likely, that human consciousness contained “great energies” that could be called forth in times of need as “the religious experience”, and that the need for spiritual nourishment is natural and healthy for both individuals and society.

James’ lectures brought him international acclaim as one of the first American philosophers to achieve acceptance and respect in Europe. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was well received when published and soon became a core work in the disciplines of both psychology and philosophy. It is still considered one of the best books on religion ever written. The book has remained in print for over a century and is now in its 36th printing. The Modern Library division of Random House ranks it as the penultimate book of non-fiction of the twentieth century.

**William James** (January 11, 1842 – August 26, 1910) was an American philosopher and psychologist considered by many to be one of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century. He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts into a wealthy and gifted family: his father was a noted Swedenborgian theologian, his brother was the brilliant novelist Henry James, and his sister was the diarist Alice James. Trained as a physician, he offered the first psychology course in the United States and helped found the principles of functional psychology, earning the label of “Father of American Psychology”. As a philosopher, he developed the principles of radical empiricism and is considered along with John Dewey and Charles Sanders Pierce as one of the great figures in the school of pragmatism. James wrote widely on many topics and is best remembered for his *Principles of Psychology*, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.