

OZ LORENTZEN
Prairie College

BOOK PROFILE: WILLIAM JAMES AND A SCIENCE OF RELIGIONS

William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience (Columbia Series in Science and Religion) Wayne Proudfoot, editor. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 138 pp. \$34.50 (cloth) ISBN: 0231132042.

THE MAIN CONTRIBUTION OF THIS TEXT is its attempt to introduce *The Varieties* into the critical discourse in both James studies and a variety of academic disciplines. Therefore, the text consists of contributors who all bring James' discussion of Religion in *The Varieties* into the critical light of James' overall intellectual contributions and into the specific demands and interests of select disciplines. Richard Rorty, for instance, challenges and clarifies James' use of the term "pragmatism," while Ann Taves and Jerome Brunner introduce James' contributions and involvement in psychology. In a similar manner, other contributors use the disciplinary constraints of philosophy and history to locate, understand, develop, utilize, and critique *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

The book, *William James and a Science of Religions*, is a published version of a colloquium marking the centennial of James' *Varieties*. The nature of the colloquium and subsequent dialogue develops an obvious strength of the text: the various essays, coming from different perspectives, engage and challenge each other. The reader thus benefits from a genuine dialogue that centers on William James and his ongoing contribution to a "science of religion." As a consequence, the reader gets a good look at the issues and questions that set the agenda for current debates in Jamesian scholarship.

The unifying theme in *William James and a Science of Religions* is an effort to take *The Varieties* seriously as both an important piece of American intellectual history and, more importantly, as a valuable contribution to current attempts to develop a science of Religion. The volume begins with the observation which several of the contributors share: *The Varieties* has been strangely absent from attempts to understand James' developed thought on pragmatism and its attendant view of truth, especially the possibility of truth in religious belief/experience. Further

attention is drawn to the fact that James' contribution in *The Varieties* is largely ignored by those who currently engage in the academic study of Religion. These lacunae are addressed by each author according to his or her own area of expertise. The responses range from specifying a precise terminological/methodological contribution to the study of religion, as does Ann Taves, to the more common approach of clarifying what James accomplishes (or set out to accomplish) in *The Varieties*.

It is possible that these lacunae (the strange gaps) are due in part to the ambiguities or inconsistencies that Richard Rorty, Wayne Proudfoot, and David Hollinger (among others) point out in *The Varieties*, especially in light of James' more succinct statements in "The Will to Believe" and *Pragmatism*, which historically bracket *The Varieties*. Philip Kitcher's concluding chapter is instructive in this regard. He helpfully demonstrates how our preconceptions about the type of argument that James' advances in *The Varieties* and the criterion which he employs to justify his thesis, can lead us to miss and dismiss James' central contribution. Though Kitcher's argument is couched in methods of reasoning specific to the discipline of the philosophy of science, he challenges us to take seriously the contribution of *The Varieties* according to its *own* criteria.

This strategy, seems to be sadly absent from many of the other essays in the text—and this is perhaps inevitable, since Kitcher's conclusion seems to rest on a similar blind spot, one that he had successfully restricted during the body of his essay. In fact, this is one of the main contributions of James' corpus, as Proudfoot phrases it:

James...argued that no inquiry is without presuppositions and interests, that the questions that elicit inquiry set constraints on acceptable answers, and that beliefs are always assessed under conditions of uncertainty. *Ordinary inquiry does not differ in these respects from scientific inquiry* (3, my emphasis).

We all write from a context! *William James and a Science of Religion* demonstrates this truth. The question that an effort to "re-experience" *The Varieties of Religious Experience* raises is the extent to which we can import *into* our experience the insights from someone/thing outside of our experience. I understand the central thrust in James' *Varieties* to be an affirmative answer to this question. For James, religious experience demonstrates that the human is open to a wider/greater *reality!* This current attempt to experience *The Varieties*, however, seems to miss this. In fact, the chief critical complaint the various essays raise about James' contribution, could be understood in this way: *since, James does not address my (our) questions and since he does not answer them in the way I (we) would, his work has some serious flaws.*

In an otherwise invaluable tribute to James and a celebration of his thought, this inability to be open to that which is beyond our context, radically lessens this appreciative gesture--since, as I submit, to miss this is to miss the heart of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

OZ LORENTZEN (Ph.D Syracuse University) works at Prairie College, Three Hills, Alberta. He is currently involved in two experiential based holistic learning programs where his interest in alternative models of rationality finds a practical outworking.

©2005 Oz Lorentzen. All rights reserved.

Lorentzen, Oz. "Book Profile: William James and a Science of Religions." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 3 (Fall 2005): 133-135.
PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.3/lorentzen.pdf>