

Bringing William James to the 21st Century

Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience: James's Classic Study in Light of Resiliency,
Temperament, and Trauma

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Bridgers's *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience: James's Classic Study in Light of Resiliency, Temperament, and Trauma* falls in line flawlessly with William James's (1902/1997) classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Even retaining his methodology, Bridgers does an excellent job of supplementing James's thought with contemporary theory and research. In psychology today, James often does not receive the attention he deserves. Some of this is due to his writing style. Many of his books are thick and difficult to read for some contemporary students, despite what is generally viewed as a clear writing style. This deters many students and professionals in our sound-bite culture. However, there are many ways James is relevant to contemporary psychology.

James was one of the first psychologists to present at the famous Gifford Lectures that have served as one of the most important dialogues between science and religion since their beginning in 1888 (Witham, 2005). These lectures are the basis of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and also played a pivotal role in gaining acceptance for American intellectuals within the Gifford series. Witham, who recently published a significant volume on the history of the Gifford lectures, pointed out that James's lectures laid foundations for the development of Whitehead's process philosophy. Additionally, in several of James's works, he pointed toward the development of postmodernism. Along with being one of the first people to study the psychology of religion and being routinely cited as the father of American psychology, this garners James an elite place in the history of psychology as well as the history of thought.

Bridgers's book provides a good opportunity to introduce James to contemporary psychologists and students. This book summarizes a good deal of James's important contributions before examining his thoughts in light of the past one hundred years of research and investigation. Although it is not realistic for a book of this size to replace the breadth of

James's thinking about religion, this book is a more realistic supplementary text in the psychology of religion. One limitation for academic settings, however, is that it does come from a somewhat more explicit Christian background than James, limiting its usefulness in classroom settings. Outside of this limitation, the book would serve as an excellent text for psychology of religion classes in both psychology and religious studies departments.

Phenomenological Investigation

James's methodology was astoundingly ahead of its time. Many of his approaches to inquiry reflect what is now being advocated by postmodernism. James believed that multiple methodologies were the best approach to scientific investigation. The type of inquiry may vary in accordance with the specific content being studied. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, his primary methodology was phenomenological or qualitative research, although other fields such as neurology and anthropology also received attention. In flipping through James's classic, the reader will notice frequent quotes from biographies, case histories, and interviews he conducted. These provided evidence for the varieties of religious experience James identified.

Bridgers devotes four of the seven chapters to exploring James's typology of healthy-mindedness (prophets), the sick soul (monks), and the mystics. With each type, she begins with a summarizing of James's thought, often including contemporary research and theory. Next, she adds qualitative support through various biographies and personal accounts occurring since the original publication of James's work in 1902. Bridgers's research provides solid support that James's typology still has relevance for understanding contemporary religious experience.

Temperament and Personality

Bridgers relies heavily on two primary views when examining the value of James's typology in light of contemporary psychology. First, she reviews Kagan's work, which primarily

views temperament as a product of biology. Second, she addresses a variety of researchers and theorists that view temperament as a product of biology and/or early life experience. Kagan clearly receives the majority of attention despite regular discussion of how attachment, early relationships, and other experiences impact temperament.

Regardless of whether temperament is a product of biology or experience, Bridgers assumes that it is relatively stable from an early point in life. Additionally, consistent with James, she believes that temperament plays a vital role in religious experience. In other words, to truly understand why a person is religious in the way they are religious, it is essential to look beyond the content of the religion to the personality of the religious individual.

Conversion

Conversion was another important theme in James's writing. He was interested in the different ways people experienced conversion. The word *lysis* was used to refer to a more gradual conversion process that occurred over time. This is contrasted with *crisis*, a more abrupt conversion often accompanied by intense emotional experience. Bridgers and James advocate that the type of conversion experienced by an individual is connected to their temperament or personality. For example, Bridgers suggests that people who have a crisis conversion are more likely to have had traumatic childhood experiences. In support of this, she cites many important religious figures, such as Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, and John Wesley, who had intense conversion experiences and also experienced a form of childhood trauma.

Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) found similar results in their quantitative study of attachment and religion. According to their research, 28 percent of religious individuals with an avoidant attachment style had a conversion experience during adolescence. Comparatively, less than one percent of individuals with a secure attachment and four percent of individuals with an

anxious/ambivalent attachment had a conversion experience. The conversion experiences discussed by Kirkpatrick and Shaver are comparable with the crisis conversions discussed by Bridgers. Similarly, a variety of research suggests that various aspects of personality and personal history, including attachment, culture, and gender, impact the way people experience God (Hoffman et al., 2005).

As suggested by these findings, religious experience and the way an individual is religious appear to be impacted by personality and temperament. Dating back to the early writings of Freud (1927/1961), this has been used as an argument that God doesn't exist. James (1902/1997) takes a different perspective. Whereas James recognized that personal qualities influence aspects of religiosity, he believed this didn't invalidate belief in the existence of God. Just as the experience of transference doesn't mean that the therapist doesn't exist, distorted religious experience doesn't mean that the subject of religious belief is nonexistent.

This places religious experience in an interesting context. If religious experience is partially a product of personality and, potentially, pathology, then it has a place in the consulting room. For many years since James's initial publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, religion and spirituality were considered a taboo topic in therapy. However, recent changes in the field created a renewed interest in religion. The studies cited by Bridgers demonstrate that a return to the writings of James may provide an informative basis for contemporary research.

The Value of Trauma or Crisis

Hillman and Ventura (1993), in their critique of contemporary psychotherapy, caution that successful treatment by today's standards often leads to personal passivity. In other words, by comforting people, it increases their ability to tolerate what should cause concern or outrage. In particular, Hillman and Ventura believe this leads to personal passivity on political and

societal realms leading to a lack of engagement on important social issues. However, this is part of a bigger issue. Contemporary culture seems to devalue crisis, including the growth-facilitating and development-enhancing aspects of suffering. At best, these experiences are accepted as part of life and individuals are helped to better tolerate them. Therapy, if done carelessly, may encourage this process, which devalues healthy forms of crisis and suffering.

Bridgers seems to suggest that James, too, would voice concerns about some contemporary trends in psychotherapy and pastoral counseling. She states, "Today, most pastoral response to the traumatized takes the form of privatized pastoral counseling . . . this practice privatizes the response to trauma and does not facilitate the reaggregation that James recognized and quite rightly valued so highly" (p. 200). This is a complex issue, one that deserves more space than allowed in a book review, and it points to a critical issue in contemporary psychology and religion. Reckless comforting that does not take into account the broader psychological meaning of trauma and crisis may do more disservice than service. Or, consistent with James's thinking, it may stifle the developmental process on personal and cultural levels.

This is not to state that James, Bridgers, or myself would advocate that therapy should not be in the business of alleviating pain and suffering. Instead, it is advocating that suffering should be understood and dealt with in the proper context. Crisis is often an important aspect of growth. If therapists automatically attempt to alleviate the pain of a crisis without consulting the client's desires or considering the growth-facilitating aspects of crisis, they may inadvertently impede growth. The first consideration must be the client's desires. However, responsible therapists should also help clients understand potential advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to treatment.

Conclusion

Bridgers's book is a welcome addition to the psychology of religion literature. Though James's influence on American psychology has always been evident, it has not received as much attention in recent years. As Bridgers demonstrates, James's theory is still relevant and applicable today. This book may play an important role in educating a new generation of therapists about the importance and value of James's contribution to the psychology of religion.

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