

Documents

NOTES ON WILLIAM JAMES, *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Soon after his well-known conversion experience of 1901, Russell read William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). We know this because he told Alys that James has plenty to say on the feeling of "Thy will be done" (SLBR 1: 243), and Nick Griffin comments that "apparently ... everyone in Russell's circle of friends was reading [the book]" (1: 246). And in his 1910 tribute to James, Russell wrote that it was "one of James's most interesting books. ... Religious men of all types are described, and an attempt is made to show wherein their religion was useful to them. Even the types naturally most repugnant to the author are treated with kindly insight, and we are invited to admire the happiness which they derived from their various beliefs. But to say that this suffices to prove that their beliefs were in any way true will remain a paradox to many, in spite of all the charm and persuasiveness of William James's exposition" (Papers 6: 288). Russell seldom otherwise mentioned the book. Instances are "Philosophy in the Twentieth Century", where both religious and scientific beliefs can pass the test of "the achievement of our desires" (Papers 9: 455), and Religion and Science, on the "truths" evoked by laughing gas.

To prepare for writing on James and the pragmatic view of religion and truth in A History of Western Philosophy, Russell took notes on both Pragmatism and the "Philosophy", "Conclusions" and "Postscript" chapters of Varieties. Despite the latter notes, he did not make use of Varieties in his chapter. Yet the pragmatic treatment of religious experience and values seems to have been firmly on his mind. In "Reply to Criticisms", written about the same year (1943), he confessed that, although religious experience does not provide clues to the nature of the real, "In the realm of value, I admit the significance of religious experience" (Papers 11: 52-3). The notes, which may aid in understanding his distinction between significance and truth, are from HWP's treasure trove of notes and outlines (RA1 210.006743, fol. 12 and an unfoliated leaf; they continue from his notes on Pragmatism).—(K.B.)

Note use of phrase "religious experience" (in *Pragmatism*, Ch. 8). Comes in book on ditto. He describes this book as "a laborious attempt to extract from the privacies of religious experience some general facts" (p. 433).

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In what sense can we speak of religious “experience”? *Prima facie*,
the experience is personal, of our own states of mind.
True, the mystic or visionary *thinks* he experiences *objects*.
But not if usual scientific tests accepted.
Land in Antarctic turned out to be mist.
Snakes in D.T. (delirium tremens) Mrs. Webb.
All perception only accepted where others agree; otherwise, private.
Mystic, blood too alkaline.
No test except consensus.
Does religion do good? Lucretius thought not.
Women in Connecticut die to please priests.
Religion causes State Department to favour Franco.
Question whether belief does good is itself one of truth: does it do
good, or does it only do good to think it does good?
In regard to consequences, pragmatists accept *ordinary* truth.
Usually easier to decide whether belief *true* than whether does good.
In James, merely dishonest attempt to bolster up superstition.
Pity he lived so long.

James, *Religious Experience*. p. 431

- 433 General facts from private religious experience
446 How help my behaviour to know God happy?
498 Appeal to stinks (science) shallow—only symbols, personal
phenomena real.
506 Leuba: “God is not known, he is not understood; he is used”
[James approves]
Intellectually: Contact with higher powers possible.
515 Conscious person continuous with wider self which gives sav-
ing experiences
516 We and God have business with each other.
525–6 Perhaps many Gods.

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