



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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Shamans, Visions and Ghosts: Exploring spiritual and Religious Experiences

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



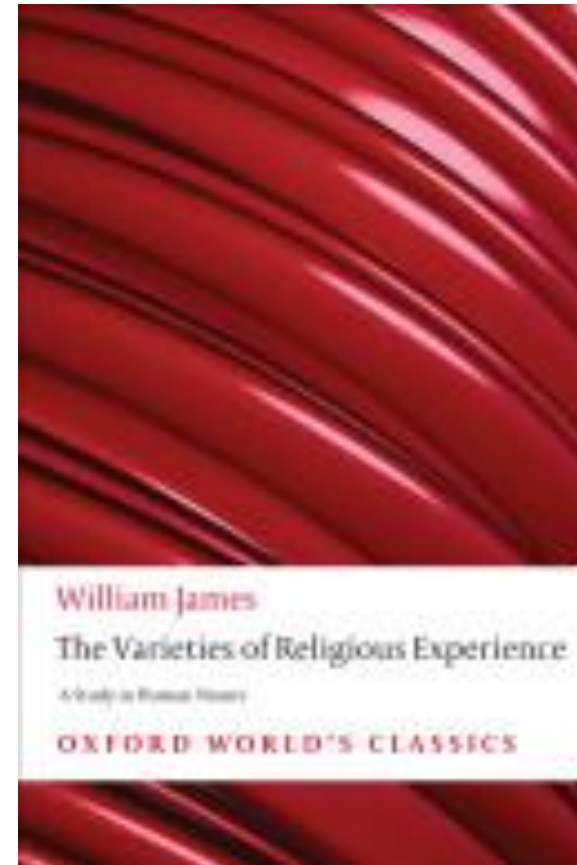
www.uwtsd.ac.uk

William James (1842-1910)



- Studied medicine at Harvard
- Interrupted his study to go with naturalist Louis Agassiz to the Amazon where he got ill
- After return of study he went to Germany to study with Rudolf Virchow and others
- Graduated after return from Germany but became ill again
- -> unable to practice medicine
- Focused on psychology and became important American psychologist

- Became famous for his Gifford Lectures on religious experience at Edinburgh in 1901/1902



From his letters...

- “*First* to defend (against all the prejudices of my ‘class’) experience against philosophy as being the real backbone of the world’s religious life – I mean prayer, guidance and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world’s meaning; and *second*, to make the reader or hearer believe, what I myself invincibly do believe, that, although all the special manifestations of religion have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories) yet the life of it as a whole is mankind’s most important function” (in a letter to Fanny Morse, written on 12 April 1900, published in: James and James 2008: 127).

William James and RE

- James saw religious experience not as different from ordinary experiences
- But he described them as ineffable (=> unable to describe in full)
- -> religious experience as having a mystical element, linked to internal and private feelings

- James highlights the importance of personal experiences, even over any theological dimension such as doctrinal and institutional aspects of religions
- -> important to include various personal accounts of people's experiences, not only from founders of religions but also ordinary people

James's definition of religion

- Religion as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine' (in *The Varieties of Religions Experience*, 2002 [1902], p. 29).

What can we learn from James today?

- Religious and spiritual experiences are more important than religious doctrines
- They not different from other experiences (hence, they are not signs of mental illness or other disorders)
- Everyone can have them (religious, spiritual and even agnostic people)

Ann Taves (1952-)

- PhD at Chicago
- Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara
- former president of the American Academy of Religion
- Now Professor Emeritus



Publications

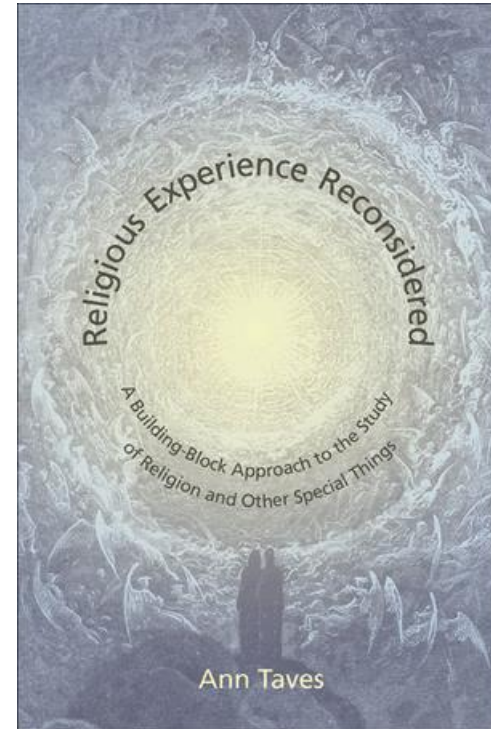
- Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James (1999)
- Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things (2009)
- Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths (2016)

Religion, Experience, and Mind Lab Group

- Inventory of Non-Ordinary Experiences (INOE)
- Aim of project is to create a validated measure that will help determine the extent to which cultural differences affect the frequency, clustering, and appraisal of non-ordinary experiences (see also interview with Ann Taves, link on Moodle)

Ann Taves and RE

- Continuation of William James
- Tensions between people experience something and people studying these people



Definition by Ann Taves

- Religious experience are involuntary acts that include uncontrolled bodily movements, spontaneous vocalizations, unusual sensory experiences, and alterations of consciousness and/or memory (1999: 3)

Revelatory Events (2016)

- She compares in this book the emergence of three new spiritual paths (Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles).
- -> expansion from historical approach in her earlier work to contemporary experiences

Further information

- [Ann Taves – Religious Studies, UC Santa Barbara \(ucsb.edu\)](#)