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


Lynn Bridgers, an assistant professor of pastoral ministries and religious education at St. Thomas University (Miami, Florida), aims to review and explore aspects of Williams James 1902 classic work on religion, Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience. One is immediately confronted with one of the few weaknesses of Bridges book in that she presupposes her readers have a working knowledge William James himself, as well as his Contemporary Varieties.

For the benefit of JYT readers who may not be familiar, some basic information will assist the reader in understanding Bridges' work. William James, New York City born, was a professor at Harvard University from 1880-1907. He became famous for his lectures and writing in physiology, psychology, and philosophy. He was a prodigious writer and his 1200 page Principles of Psychology (1890) was a seminal work in this budding new field of academic interest. In 1898 he gave the Gifford Lectures in English and the Humanities at Edinburgh University. The lectures series, "Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience" was immediately seen as charting new territory in the understanding of religious phenomenon. His lectures were published in 1902 and down through the decades, scholars worldwide continue to see the importance and contemporary relevance of his contribution to the psychology of religion field. (An excellent lecture by lecture summary and analysis may be had at www.bytrent.demon.co.uk/james/james00.html)

Our author Lynn Bridgers seeks to continue this now 100+ year old discussion regarding Contemporary Varieties. The book's primary contribution is to give fresh vocabulary to James' conceptualizations, corroborating them with current psychology of religion terminology and frameworks. At the outset the person interested in religious youth work or the academic study of youth and religion will understand that youth themselves have a variety of religious experiences. Bridges's work then frames a larger context to our own work and experience, either as an academician or youth work practitioner. Bridgers brings forward Contemporary Varieties as quite up-to-date in so far as the work contains the "...germ of phenomenology, contextualism, and modern hermeneutic analysis" (p.17).
Bridgers first steers the reader to appreciate that William James was the first to understand that religious experience is first and foremost, pluralistic (p.21). That is, there are *varieties* in how humans pursue religiosity. We take that for granted now, but it was a revolutionary concept when James first spoke the words in Edinburgh 1898.

Next Bridges connects James “varieties” with present day Harvard’s Jerome Kagan and his brain research work. And here is the conceptual bombshell, or academic epiphany in Bridge’s work: James’ primary types of religious experience match almost exactly with Jerome Kagan (et. al)’s work on human temperament and personality. Simply stated: *different people understand and express religion in primarily two different ways, and that “personality style” or “temperament” are largely determinative in this difference.* (For your own epiphanies in this regard, read, as I did, Kagan’s Galen’s Prophecy. It is Kagan’s oft quoted, seminal work on the implications of human temperament differentiation.) Another way to say it: personality mediates religious experience.

Much of the remaining bulk of Bridger’s work, then, unpacks these temperaments, connecting them to James’ concepts. The chapters follow a similar pattern for each: 1) Kagan’s terms, 2) James’s equivalent terms, 3) illustrations of both. Bridger’s also contributes her own over-arching descriptor of each temperament from a religious perspective.

**Prophets** (Bridgers’s term) are ones who have a happiness that is “congenital and irreclaimable” (Kagan’s term, p.68) and who James referred to as “healthy minded” (p.67). This is Bridger’s chapter 4, resting on James’s Lectures IV and V. These people are characterized by resiliency (p.88) and roughly 40% of adults process spirituality (p.93) with this as their emotional/religious set point.

**Monks** (Bridgers’s term) are those who are “inhibited/anxious” (Kagan’s term, p. 102) and inhabit the dark world of the sick soul (James’s term, p. 102). This is Bridge’s chapter 5, resting on James’s lectures VI, VII, and VIII. There is “little talent for happiness” (p. 104) in this person on the one hand, but on the other hand, a deep capacity for spirituality.

**Mystics** (Bridgers’s term) are those whose “...spiritual life springs suddenly out of long dark journey.” (James’s terms, p. 134). Bridgers acknowledges Kagan was not interested in one’s proclivity toward sudden conversion or not, so her analysis connects to other researchers, as well as foundationally on James’s