

Notes for *The Religious Life: The Insights of William James*. By Donald Capps. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015. 245pp. \$31

William James's famous *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is based on a series of lectures presented at the University of Edinburgh in 1901 and 1902. One hundred years later, a wave of edited volumes celebrated *The Varieties'* centennial anniversary¹, followed by a stream of single-authored volumes on James's classic.² The most recent of these is Donald Capps's *The Religious Life: The Insights of William James*. Capps was the William Harte Felmeth Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary until his recent and sudden death.³ His final book has been published posthumously, with the help of his son, John. Coupled with Capps's prior volumes on James, *The Religious Life* perfectly bookends a life dedicated to practical psychological-theological exploration.⁴

The Religious Life has two parts. Part I consists of eight chapters, which summarize and explain James's key topics in *The Varieties*. Part II contains three chapters; two are case studies of religious personages relevant to *The Varieties*, followed by a concluding integrative chapter. Thus, most of the book guides the reader through *The Varieties*, sometimes almost paragraph by paragraph.

The necessary contextual information for a new reader of *The Varieties* is provided in Chapter 1, including when and why it was written, James's background in psychology and philosophy, and an overview of James's personal and professional life. The chapter is exceptional in style and leaves the reader with a sense of the integrity and depth of James's life. This essay will provide an excellent introduction to any student's first reading of *The Varieties* and, in fact, we believe it is superior to the publisher-invited introductions to the various editions of *The Varieties*, which have been authored by such luminaries as Reinhold Niebuhr, Eugene Kennedy, Robert Coles, and Peter J. Gomes.

Capps believes that *The Varieties* was James's masterpiece (22), and thus he seeks to highlight many of the brilliant brushstrokes that make up his great work. In Part I, seven chapters each cover selective groups of James's lectures. Each chapter begins with a list of the lectures from *The Varieties* it covers as well as the overarching theme those lectures discuss. Capps then explicates numerous selections from the chapters, organizing them under helpful chapter headings that highlight key terms and themes. This approach can border on the repetitive but, that said, *The Religious Life* gives readers new to James a notable clarity that they would not find as easily in *The Varieties* itself. James's rhetorical and pedagogical style, in part, was to sympathetically lay out opposing arguments and then contest them with his own pragmatic perspective. Capps summarizes James's core arguments and highlights the opposing positions that James often leaves readers to infer on their own. Even Capps's footnotes offer new contextual information that brings *The Varieties* into sharper focus.

Despite its strengths, Part I of *The Religious Life* has a major shortcoming. After discussing in detail each of James's 1901 lectures (Lectures 1-10), Capps moves directly from the description of saintliness (Lectures 11-13) to prayer (Lecture 19). More specifically, from the ten lectures James delivered in 1902, Capps omits lectures on the pragmatic value of saintliness (Lectures 14-15), mysticism (Lectures 16-17), philosophy (Lecture 18), and James's conclusion (Lecture 20). This omission may cause difficulty for those reading Capps's book as a companion to *The Varieties*, given that the lectures on mysticism and his lecture on the philosophy of religion are among the most appreciated by students. The introduction to *The Religious Life* acknowledges that the book "does not cover all" of James's twenty lectures (xii), but the lectures omitted are too crucial to ignore for sheer brevity's sake and the introduction provides no explanation for this choice. (One cannot help but wonder if the author's sudden passing played a role in this omission.)

In Part II, Capps presents two remarkable case studies: Rev. Ansel Bourne (1826-1910), an itinerant preacher who experienced a

break in his personality at age 61, and Rev. Phillip Brooks (1835-1893), an Episcopal clergyman who served as the Rector of Boston's Trinity Church and, for some years, as a beloved preacher at Harvard University. Bourne's experience is especially relevant to James's lecture in *The Varieties* on "The Divided Self and the Process of Unification," and Brooks's life is especially relevant to the exemplary spiritual characteristics of the religious life James mentions in his lectures on conversion and saintliness. Capps is thorough in compiling information that brings both of these cases to life. These two chapters stand out as unique in publications on James's religious ideas, in part because Capps draws from pre-*Varieties* publications, as well as *The Varieties*, to demonstrate James's psychological insight into significant religious personages of his time.

In the final chapter, Capps moves from reflecting on "hope" and James's loss of his infant son Herman, to making claims about God's nature being one of hope and God being the original risk taker. Some readers may regard these ideas to be unfounded theological claims and others may see them as simply out of place in the final chapter. However, such "over-beliefs," as James would warmly call them, should not dissuade any potential readers because they do not detract from the exceptional work Capps has done in creating this book, nor does he appear to have produced them with any agenda other than that of showing his own eager agreement with some of James's beliefs.⁵ Capps, in fact, acknowledges in a footnote that he is taking some "liberty" in making these theological "suggestions." Regardless, in the final chapter Capps does correctly identify the important significance the concept of hope had for James, and the resulting essay makes a fitting conclusion.

The Religious Life: The Insights of William James is an excellent resource for those students and scholars who want a richer, deeper understanding of *The Varieties* and James's insights on the religious life. In this regard one would be hard pressed to find a better model of psychological-theological exploration.

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NOTES

¹ For example, Croce and Snarey, *James's Psychology of Religion*; Ferrari, *Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays*; Proudfoot, *James and a Science of Religion*; and Snarey, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

² For example, Bridgers, *Contemporary Varieties of Religious Experience*; Carrette, *James's Hidden Religious Imagination*; Miller, *William James's Revolution*; and Slater, *James on Ethics and Faith*.

³ Shea, "Professor Dies of Injuries."

⁴ Cf. Capps, *Men, Religion and Melancholia*; Capps & Jacobs, *The Struggle for Life*; and Capps & Capps, *James and Dewey*.

⁵ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 404-408.