

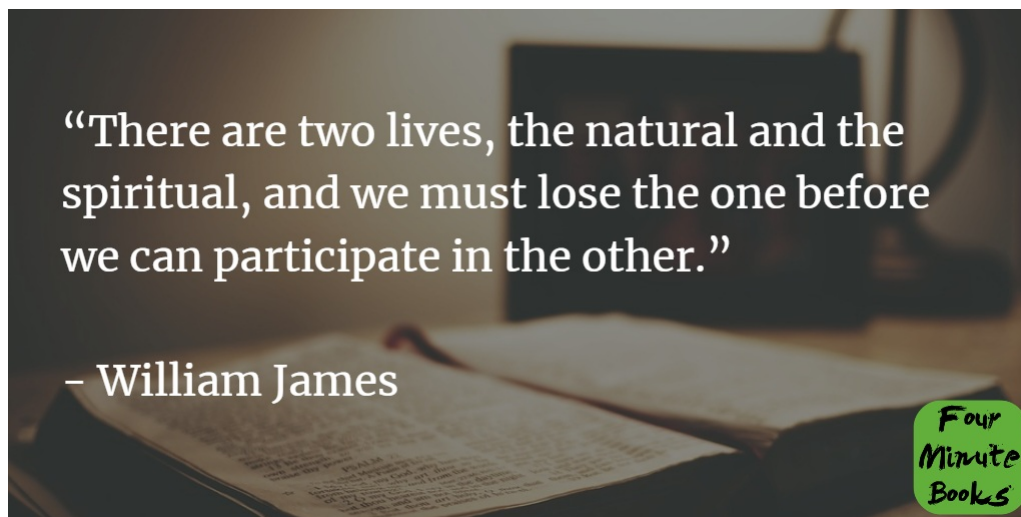
The Varieties of Religious Experience Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* will help you see how religious experiences don't need to be strictly church-related, and that you can benefit from trying some religious-like practices yourself.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



What do you think of when you hear the word religion? Maybe you're like most people and you don't really believe in anything. Or perhaps you consider yourself an atheist, a belief system that seems to be on the rise these days. Interestingly, a [2012 article in the Washington Post](#) identifies that eight out of 10 people still affiliated with a religious group at that time.

Similar to [politics](#) or any form of belief system, religion has been an integral part of human history. But what happens when you take away the churches and the dogma that surrounds much of religious belief? What about what happens on the deeper, personal level to individuals who have religious experiences?

That's exactly the kind of question that *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature* tackles. This book was written based on a series of lectures given by William James clear back in the early 1900s. James is widely known as the "Father of American Psychology" for his work in human behavior and philosophy. Although deep, this book gives some powerful insight into the psychological aspect of religious experiences.

Here are the 3 biggest lessons I've learned from this book:

1. Religion can improve our mental state, even allowing some to overcome depression.
2. Conversion isn't only a religious idea, and we can learn a lot from the many ways people experience it.
3. You don't need to be religious to receive the benefits of prayer, which is simply a transfer of energy from a higher power to you.

Are you ready to get into some deep religious and philosophical ideas? Let's dive right in!

Lesson 1: Healing ourselves, even from depression, can result from religious experiences.

Similar to ideas in *Think and Grow Rich* and *The Magic of Thinking Big*, James argues that belief has the power to change our physical world. Often paraphrased "mind over matter," this notion was widely challenged for its potential scientific inaccuracy.

Rather than being passive objects, however, humans are active participants in affecting reality. All one needs to do is unleash the force for change within through belief. Once you introduce faith to your life, religious or not, anything becomes possible. Let's take a look at one example of how the power belief from a religious experience can heal depression.

Leo Tolstoy, in his book *My Confession*, explains how he overcame deep despair through a religious experience. The source of his depression came from the notion that life was finite, therefore meaningless. After attempts to find meaning in a life that, from a scientific perspective would one day end, he continued feeling nothing.

Through recognizing the potential for the infinite life through belief in the spiritual, Tolstoy understood that life does have meaning. He saw that reason and facts on their own couldn't explain meaningful existence. The weariness with life he felt was the result of the superfluous, artistic, upper-class life of which he was a part. Once he realized that all he had to do was believe, not even become dogmatic or zealous, Tolstoy felt better.

Lesson 2: Learning from the principle of conversion can improve your life.

When you hear the word conversion, you may think it's exclusively religious. But this word simply means "to change," and isn't only an occurrence for those who go to church. **It's not just any change though, but the movement of energy from one set of beliefs to another.**

We all develop within us a set of ideas that dominates our inner minds. For good or for bad, the energy of these thoughts determines the direction of our lives. James refers to this part of ourselves as "the habitual center of personal energy." When we change, or experience

conversion, this center shifts. Whether political or religious views, each of us can change our beliefs to improve our lives. But there's a couple ways this can happen.

The first is volitional, or intentional and conscious. Tolstoy's recovery from depression described earlier is just one example of this type of conversion. Second, we have self-surrender, which takes place in the subconscious part of the brain. Let's look at an example to illustrate both of these.

Let's say you lose your keys. Volitionally seeking them involves retracing your steps to discover where you last had them. To practice self-surrender, on the other hand, you'd stop thinking about your keys and let your mind subconsciously remember the location of the keys.

Whichever type of conversion you let yourself experience, you can use this principle to upgrade your thinking. Doing so will improve many aspects of your life.

Lesson 3: Prayer is a means to transfer energy from a higher power into your life, which anyone can do.

When I say the word "religion" you might think of prayer and revelations. While important to religion, these practices aren't exclusively religious. Practicing them can have a powerful effect on your life.

In a religious sense, prayer is communication with a higher power, usually God. Some mistakenly repeat prayers, but it shouldn't be a meaningless recitation of phrases. **True power, in religion and otherwise, comes when we see prayer as a change in the soul.** The source of that transformation is transferring energy into your life from a power higher than your own. This comes more through what you feel as you pray, rather than the words you speak.

Whether you pray religiously or not, this practice has many other benefits also. Providing solace is just one example. When you recognize the need for the help of a greater force than your own, calling that power into your life through prayer, you feel comfort and peace. In this way, the practice also weakens harmful feelings like egotism and fear.

The change from negative to positive that accompanies prayer opens new ideas and paths to the mind and soul. In religion this is referred to as revelation, but it can be any spark of inspiration. Quieting your soul and seeking the help of a higher power is the gateway to receiving that insight. Making time for reflection in this way has the power to open new opportunities that your busy mind otherwise may not have recognized.

The Varieties of Religious Experience Review

Wow, this book is really profound! I'll be honest, some of the jargon, possibly due to the age of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* had me a little lost at times. Regardless, this book will have me thinking some powerful deep thoughts for a while!

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Who would I recommend The Blue Zones Solution summary to?

The 65-year-old religious couple who is curious to see a different take on their faith, the 24-year-old student of philosophy, and anyone who is interested in psychology.