

Proudfoot on  
James on RE

# Kinds of Religious Experience

## Feeling:

**Friedrich Schleiermacher**: ego being swallowed by the infinite.

**Rudolph Otto**: experiencing the numinous...

**William James**: the primary source of all religions

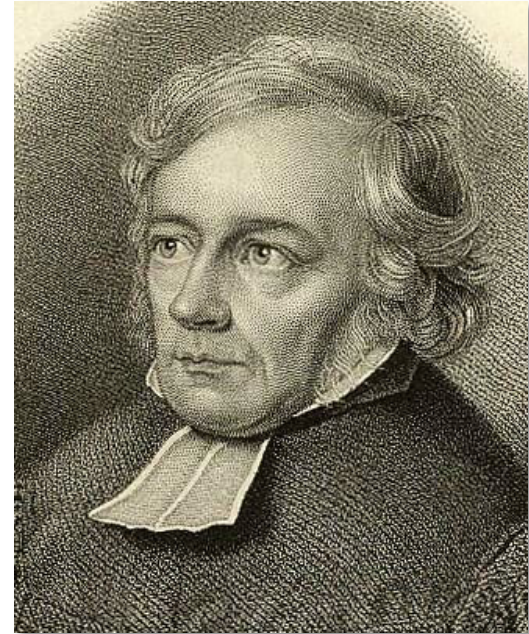
**Perceptual**: (**William Alston**) Identifying a non-sensory experience of God by comparing with how we experience sensible things.

**Interpretive**: (**Wayne Proudfoot**) Experience as an interpretive account that, from the perspective of the subject, requires a religious explanation. What matters is “how it seems at the time” and not “how things are in reality” (= nonrealism)

# Schleiermacher on R.E.

Religious experience is “a feeling of absolute or total dependence upon a source or power that is distinct from the world.”

Religious experience is entirely affective:  
non-cognitive, non-conceptual.



Friedrich Schleiermacher  
(1768-1834)  
(Halle, Berlin)

[Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* (1821)]

# Otto on Religious Experience

God's essence can be grasped only by way of feeling — intuitively, not conceptually.

God as “tremendous mystery”

Numinous experience takes three forms:

- (1) Utter creaturely **dependence**.
- (2) **Dread/awe** of the divine power.
- (3) Intense **longing** for God.



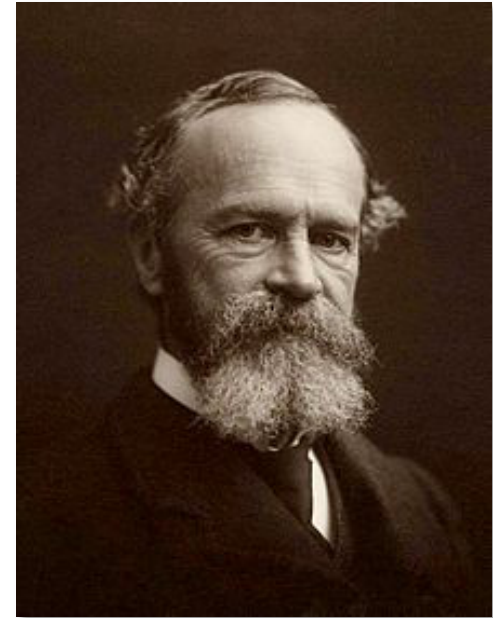
Rudolph Otto  
(1869-1937)  
(Marburg)

[Rudolph Otto, *Das Heilige* (1917)]

# James on Religious Experience

A religious experience is:

- (1) **Ineffable**: it cannot be adequately expressed in words (more like a feeling than thought).
- (2) **Noetic**: the subject feels that she has learned something from the RE.
- (3) **Transient**: the RE is temporary
- (4) **Passive**: the RE just happens to the subject; the subject can engage in a practice that might encourage an RE, but otherwise has no control over it.



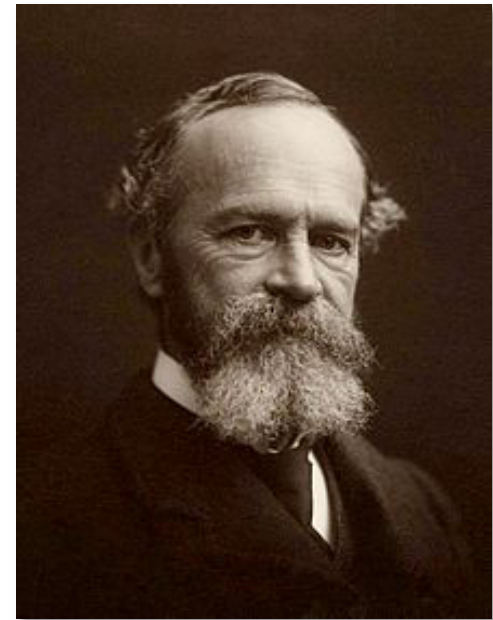
William James  
(1842-1910)  
(Harvard University)

[William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)]

# James on Religious Experience

The **epistemic authority** of religious experience:

- (1) Absolute authority over the subject.
- (2) No authority over 3<sup>rd</sup> parties.
- (3) Lessen the authority of non-religious experience.



William James  
(1842-1910)  
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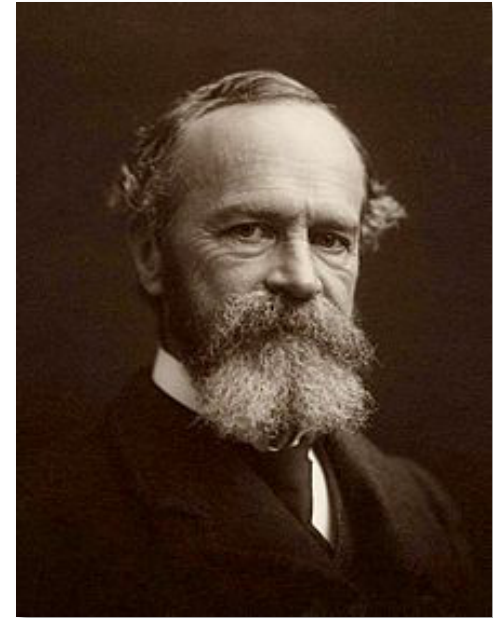
[William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)]

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**Question:** Is a religious experience, for the subject, best thought of as a rational or as a nonrational cause of whatever religious belief that might arise from the experience?



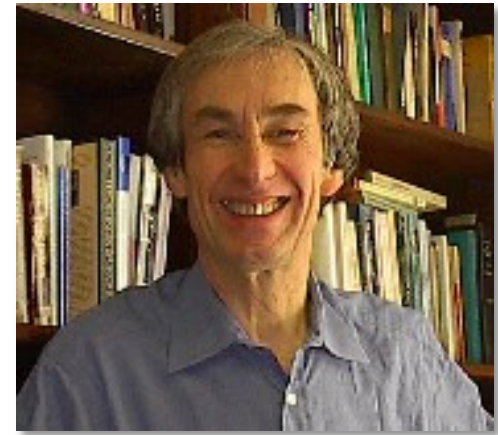
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# Proudfoot: Problems with James

**James** claims that the RE is prior to, and formative of, religious belief. RE is a basic feeling imposed on the subject (despite being noetic or knowledge-bearing), and so its origin is not relevant in our evaluation of the RE. A sensation or simple feeling of X should be assessed on its own merits.

**Proudfoot** counters that an RE is “more than a feeling”. What seem like raw feelings are actually interpretations provided by the subject; the “religious aspect” of the feeling is not a given by some “other”, but is added by the subject, and so this subjective source is relevant to our evaluation of the RE.



Wayne Proudfoot  
(b. 1939)  
(Columbia University)

[Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (1985)]



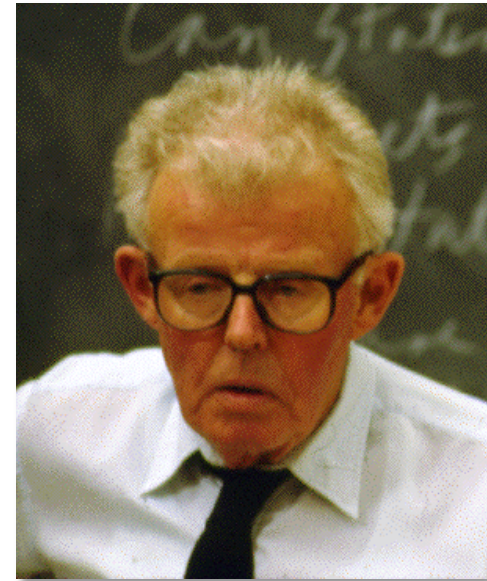
# Chisholm on Appearance

Chisholm distinguishes between two uses of appearance-type words. “The table appears round” might be taken in either of two ways:

**Comparative:** I report the image I have of the table (the raw, uninterpreted image).

**Epistemic:** I report my belief about the actual shape of the table (this interprets the raw image as how it would look to someone properly positioned).

Our normal use is epistemic, and contains the noetic aspect noted by James.



Roderick Chisholm  
(1916-1999)  
(Brown University)

[Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (1985)]

# C. S. Peirce on Beliefs

James appeals to his close friend Peirce's claim that we must distinguish between the **justification** (the rational cause) and the **explanation** (the non-rational cause) of one's belief.

**Peirce** rightly notes that a belief should be judged on its own merits (how it can be justified) and not on its origins.

**James** concludes that REs should likewise be judged on their "merits" (e.g., a feeling of the divine).

**Proudfoot** argues that the "religious" part of the experience is subjective, an added interpretive element, not part of the original objective feeling.

[Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (1985)]



Charles Sanders Peirce  
(1839-1914)  
(Harvard University)

# What is a Religious Experience?

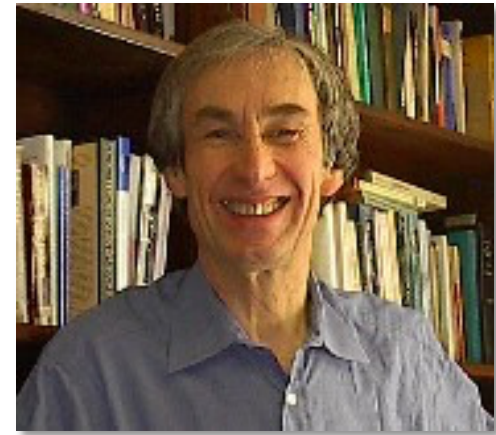
More than just religious content.

It must be identified by the subject as such (interpreted as such): an experience that can be explained in no other way than religious.

All experience is an interpretation of one kind or another.

Description vs Explanation

[Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (1985)]



Wayne Proudfoot  
(b. 1939)  
(Columbia University)