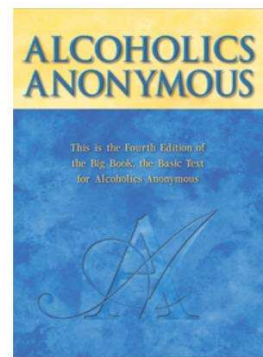
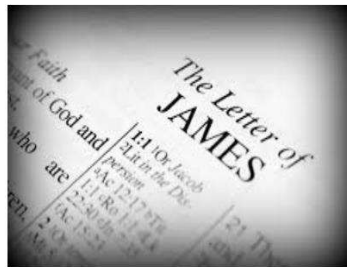
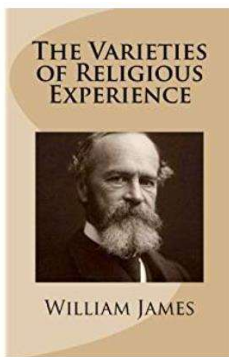
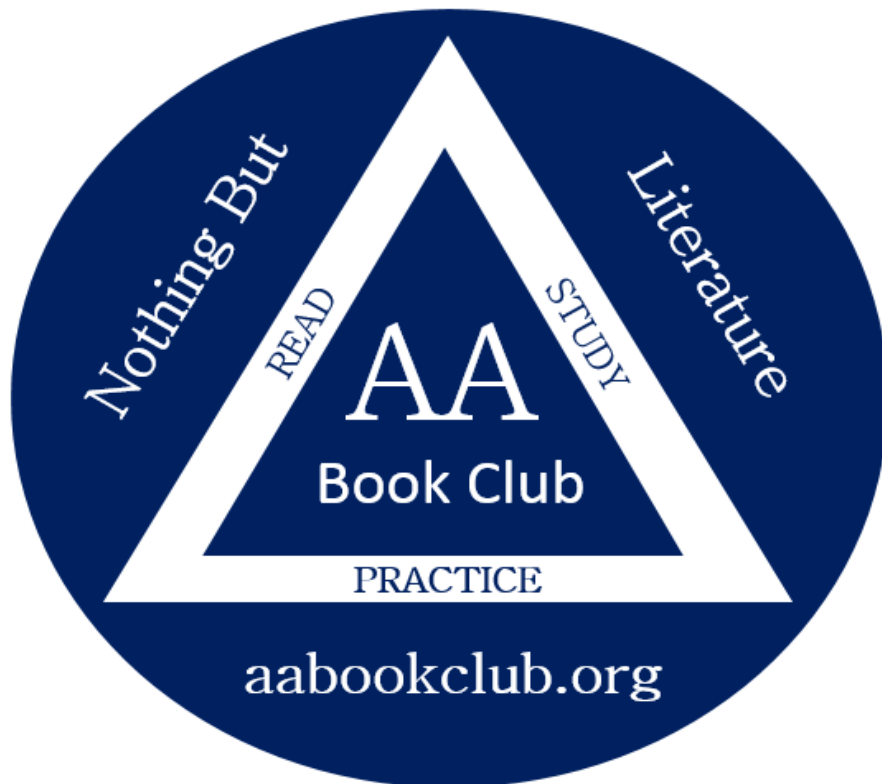


# AA and the Books of James



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## **AA and the Books of James**

“...a book may well be a revelation in spite of errors and passions and deliberate human composition, if only it be a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate...”

**William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience**

Few pieces of outside spiritual literature have been as influential on AA and its Founders as William James’ 1902 book Varieties of Religious Experience and the New Testament Book of James. William James is the only outside literature explicitly cited in the Big Book, and a key phrase from the Book of James is used there. Bill W. and Dr. Bob were exposed to both books early in their quests for sobriety, and their impact on A.A.’s program of action can be seen in its primary text. We shall be looking at the role of these books in the personal stories of A.A.’s founders first, then the influence they had on the Big Book and A.A.’s program of action.

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## I The Books of James in the Founders' Personal Histories

Bill's exposure to James' Varieties of Religious Experience (VRE) came at a very crucial time in his recovery. In Bill's Story he describes his sudden, profound experience that happened to him as he lay in his hospital bed, newly sober. At first he did not seem what to make of this event: "For a moment I was alarmed and called my friend, the doctor [Silkworth], to ask if I were still sane." (**BB pp 14**) The doctor was able to give some encouragement, and the story continues from that point. However, Bill's official A.A biography gives more detail:

Ebby ... was not quite prepared for Bill's description of what had happened - he himself had not seen bright lights nor stood on a mountaintop. But he brought Bill a book that offered further clarification. It was William James's "The Varieties of Religious Experience."... James's objective was to show that these conversion experiences had validity and value...

As Silkworth had given Bill the information he needed to understand his own alcoholism, James gave Bill the material he needed to understand what had just happened to him - and gave it to him in a way that was acceptable to Bill. Bill Wilson, the alcoholic, now had his spiritual experience ratified by a Harvard professor, called by some the father of American psychology!" (**Pass it On, pp 124, 125**)

Bill's interest in James' book would have been far more than academic, for some of the conversion experiences cited involve *chronic alcoholics who suddenly lost all desire to drink*. As we shall later see, a spiritual experience, whether sudden or gradual, came to be seen as essential to recovery from alcoholism.

For his part, Dr. Bob is also known to have read and enjoyed William James during his own spiritual quest:

Dr. Bob was a man in search of God, and it was in this area that he, like Bill Wilson, was probably among the least conservative of men. This is not remarkable when we consider that New England... still fostered many of the "new thought" and "mind cure" religions mentioned by William James in "The Varieties of Religious Experience." (The book, though not popular among Akron A.A.'s, was a favorite of Dr. Bob's.) (**Dr. Bob and the Good Old Timers, pp 306**)

The Book of James had an important, but more subtle role as Bill and Bob began working together in Akron. The two alcoholics and one's hopeful wife began each day with a period of prayer and meditation:

Each morning, there was a devotion, he [Bill] recalled. After a long silence, in which they awaited inspiration and guidance, Anne would read from the Bible. "James was our favorite," he said. "Reading from her chair



in the corner, she would softly conclude, ‘Faith without works is dead.’”

This was a favorite quote of Anne’s... **(DBATGOT, pp 71)**

Gaining their daily inspiration in part from the Book of James, the two new friends commenced their spiritual partnership, and the pioneering period of A.A. began.

## **II The influence of William James on the Big Book and A.A.**

In Pass It On, his official A.A. biography, the authors write that Bill W...

...saw that all the cases [conversion/awakening] described by James had certain common denominators, despite the diverse ways in which they manifested themselves. These insights became important to Bill in his thinking about the plight of the alcoholic and his need for spiritual help. (He would later say that James, though long in his grave, had been a founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.) **(PIO, pp 124)**

The idea of conversion or spiritual awakening is a major topic in Varieties of Religious Experience, and as this is a central idea in the Big Book, James had a major impact. As we shall see, James’ discussion of the mental states preceding conversion, and its happy results, were also highly influential. Additionally, both James and Bill W. felt the need to defend religious belief before proceeding on to with their primary purposes. Finally, we find in James several spiritual observations that are of general interest to those following a spiritual path.

Their descriptions of awakening, their chapters to the agnostic and personal adventures before and after conversion will make clear these pertinent ideas:

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## A Defense of Religious Belief

William James, in justifying his lecture series to scientifically explain religious experience, and Bill W., in trying to suggest ways to attain spiritual awakening, both engage in a defense of religious belief as practical, logical and beneficial. James, in the early chapters, draws upon first hand accounts in literature and previous research in order to show that the religious feelings reported are observable phenomenon capable of further examination. In the Big Book chapter We Agnostics, Bill makes use of his own and the other A.A. pioneers' experiences to show skeptical readers the very real effects spirituality can have in one's life. In pursuing these different, but compatible aims, the two authors use a few common lines of reasoning.

First, James and Bill W. both emphasize that the discussion will be solely about personal aspects of religious experience. James puts it this way: "The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest." (Page 39) In this way, he 'defines religion down' to its most basic and general level:

Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. (VRE, pp 53)

In this way James narrows the scope of his inquiry to observable reactions of those with such beliefs.

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us 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. (VRE, pp 31)

In this way too, he avoids metaphysical and theological issues which are out of the purview of his psychological training, and which cannot be scientifically examined:

In one sense at least the personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. (VRE, pp 31)

For his part, Bill W. emphasizes the feelings and intuitions spiritual people have, and which are accessible to his readers: "We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found. It was so with us. (Page 55) Theological and ecclesiastical debates are beside his point, and may remind readers of some of their previous objections to religious ideas.

When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God. This applies, too, to other spiritual expressions which you find in

this book. Do not let any prejudice you may have against spiritual terms deter you from honestly asking yourself what they mean to you. **(BB, pp 47)**

In this way, too, Bill reassures those with spiritual beliefs that these will not be challenged by the A.A. program:

If what we have learned and felt and seen means anything at all, it means that all of us, whatever our race, creed, or color are the children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try. Those having religious affiliations will find here nothing disturbing to their beliefs or ceremonies. There is no friction among us over such matters.

We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members identify themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations, or his present choice. **(BB, pp 28)**

We represent no particular faith or denomination. We are dealing only with general principles common to most denominations. **(BB, pp 93-94)**

The emphasis on the personal aspect rather than on rites and rituals has given rise to the common A.A. expression that the fellowship is ‘spiritual not religious.’ The Big Book’s narrow focus on personal experience without regard to religious doctrine widens the appeal of A.A.’s discussion of spirituality.

Secondly, both James and Bill W. describe the positive effects of religious belief, broadly defined. For both men, religious faith works, and is therefore valuable. James, a founder of the philosophy of pragmatism, a way of thought aptly summed up by another pragmatic thinker:

Charles Sanders Pierce, another major figure in Pragmatism, sums it up this way: “Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism>)

As a pragmatist as well as the father of American psychology, James considers the results stemming from religious belief are far more important than metaphysical and theological speculation: “In the end it had to come to our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.” **(Page 21)** [Quoting Mathew 7:20] Once again, the results are observable phenomenon capable of analysis and study, and he makes this point explicitly:

It is the character of inner happiness in the thoughts which stamps them as good, or else their consistency with our other opinions and their

serviceability for our needs, which make them pass for true in our esteem.

And:

Opinions here [regarding natural sciences] are invariably tested by logic and by experiment, no matter what may be their author's neurological type. It should be no otherwise with religious opinions. Their value can only be ascertained by spiritual judgments directly passed upon them, judgments based on our own immediate feeling primarily; and secondarily on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true. Immediate luminousness, in short, philosophical reasonableness, and moral helpfulness are the only available criteria. **(VRE, pp 17, 19)**

Bill W. echoes the pragmatic approach that James espoused, saying: "We agnostically inclined would not feel satisfied with a proposal which does not lend itself to reasonable approach and interpretation. Hence we are at pains to tell why we think our present faith is reasonable, why we think it more sane and logical to believe than not to believe." **(Page 53)** The collective experience of the A.A. pioneers, in first doubting and then coming to spiritual beliefs of their own understanding, is meant to be both evidence and inspiration for Big Book readers:

We have learned that whatever the human frailties of various faiths may be, those faiths have given purpose and direction to millions. People of faith have a logical idea of what life is all about. Actually, we used to have no reasonable conception whatever. We used to amuse ourselves by cynically dissecting spiritual beliefs and practices when we might have observed that many spiritually-minded persons of all races, colors, and creeds were demonstrating a degree of stability, happiness and usefulness which we should have sought ourselves.

And

When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon the Spirit of the Universe, we had to stop doubting the power of God. Our ideas did not work. But the God idea did. **(BB, pp 49, 52)**

Thirdly, both James and Bill W. counter the argument of skeptics that God's existence and spiritual principles cannot be proven and do not conform to rules of logic by responding that such considerations do not comprise the full range of human experience. James writes:

Nevertheless, if we look on man's whole mental life as it exists, on the life of men that lies in them apart from their learning and science, and that they inwardly and privately follow, we have to confess that the part of it of which rationalism can give an account is relatively superficial... If you have intuitions at all, they come from a deeper level of your nature than the loquacious level which rationalism inhabits. **(VRE, pp 72)**

In a later chapter James gives an everyday example of a non-rational, yet meaningful moment of insight:

The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one...

This sense of deeper significance is not confined to rational propositions. Single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical sounds, all bring it when the mind is tuned aright.

**(VRE, pp 373-374)**

Bill describes his reaction after being told during Ebby's spiritual talk that he could choose his own conception of God. He began to drop his resistance to the 'God idea' based on supposed logic, and follow his own heart in spiritual matters: "It melted the icy intellectual mountain in whose shadow I had lived and shivered many years. I stood in the sunlight at last." **(Page 12)** In *We agnostics* he writes with passion about faith and reason:

[H]ad we not worshipfully beheld the sunset, the sea, or a flower? Who of us had not loved something or somebody? How much did these feelings, these loves, these worships, have to do with pure reason? Little or nothing, we saw at last. Were not these things the tissue out of which our lives were constructed? Did not these feelings, after all, determine the course of our existence? It was impossible to say we had no capacity for faith, or love, or worship. In one form or another we had been living by faith and little else.

Imagine life without faith! Were nothing left but pure reason, it wouldn't be life. But we believed in life-of course we did. We could not prove life in the sense that you can prove a straight line is the shortest distance between two points, yet, there it was...

Hence, we saw that reason isn't everything. Neither is reason, as most of us use it, entirely dependable, though it emanate from our best minds. What about people who proved that man could never fly?

And

[W]e found ourselves thinking, when enchanted by a starlit night, "Who, then, made all this?" There was a feeling of awe and wonder, but it was fleeting and soon lost. **(BB pp 54-55, 46)**

This enchantment, worshipful beholding or deepened sense of significance, which people may experience every day, is communion with 'whatever they may consider divine' (James) or 'God as we understood him' (Bill W.).

Finally, James and Bill W. both argue for the existence of an innate sense of the

Divine, keeping in mind that both men leave the meaning of this to the individual. The full title of James' book is actually *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, implying the author's belief that a religious sense of some kind is an inherent human quality and can be examined. In an early chapter called *The Reality of The Unseen* we find this passage:

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.

And later, immediately preceding his discussion on the conversion experience, James quotes Tolstoy approvingly:

If Man did not believe that he must live for something, he would not live at all. The idea of an infinite God, of the divinity of the soul, of the union of men's actions with God - these are ideas elaborated in the infinite secret depths of human thought. **(VRE, pp 58, 181)**

Bill provides similar testimony for an innate human religious sense:

Actually we were fooling ourselves, for deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God. It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by worship of other things, but in some form or other it is there. For faith in a Power greater than ourselves, and miraculous demonstrations of that power in human lives, are facts as old as man himself.

Having found the "**Great Reality within us,**" Bill advises his readers:

We can only clear the ground a bit. If our testimony helps sweep away prejudice, enables you to think honestly, encourages you to search diligently **within yourself**, then, if you wish, you can join us on the Broad Highway. [Emphasis added] **(Both on BB, pp 55)**

This passage sums up the purpose of the Big Book chapter *We Agnostics*: to remove prejudice in spiritual matters and encourage open mindedness for, as the *Spiritual Experience* appendix states, "*Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery. But these are indispensable.*" Having made this effort, Bill proceeds to discuss the Steps needed to help bring about the spiritual awakening needed to recover from alcoholism. James, having established the validity of religion as a subject of study, continues his treatise on several facets of religious life, with fairly heavy emphasis on what he calls the conversion experience.

## The Conversion Cycle:

### What it was like - States Preceding Conversion

William James' ideas concerning the stages preceding conversion were highly influential on Bill W. and the Big Book, as was the conversion idea itself. These were not merely phases Bill and the pioneers happened to go through before getting over alcoholism; they came to be seen as necessary precursors to achieving a spiritual awakening, which brings about recovery. This is explicitly acknowledged in later A.A. literature:

[Bill] saw that all the cases described by James had certain common denominators, despite the diverse ways in which they manifested themselves. These insights became important to Bill in his thinking about the plight of the alcoholic and his need for spiritual help. (He would later say that James, though long in his grave, had been a founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.) Of the three common denominators in the case histories, the first was calamity; each person James described had met utter defeat in some vital area of his life. All human resources had failed to solve his problems. Each person had been utterly desperate...

The second common point was an admission of defeat. Each of the individuals acknowledged his own defeat as utter and absolute...

The third common denominator was an appeal to a Higher Power. This cry for help could take many forms, and it might or might not be in religious terms.

The responses were equally varied. Some had thunderbolt experiences, as did St. Paul on the road to Damascus; others had slow, gradual transformation experiences. Whatever the type of the experience, however, it brought the sufferer into a new state of consciousness, and so opened the way to release from the old problems. **(PIO, pp 124-125)**

James on the possible non-religious nature of a conversion experience:

“But to find religion is only one out of many ways of reaching unity; and the process of remedying inner incompleteness and reducing inner discord is a general psychological process, which may take place with any sort of mental material, and need not necessarily assume the religious form. In judging of the religious types of regeneration which we are about to study, it is important to recognize that they are only one species of a genus that contains other types as well.” **(VRE, pp 172)**

Varieties of Religious Experience and the Big Book both emphasize two major themes: The helpless plight of the afflicted, and the barrier to recovery presented by self-will.

## Helplessness

William James devotes a chapter each to two types of troubled individuals who sometimes undergo conversion experiences and overcome their problems. The Sick Soul is a person suffering from an inner malaise, sense of sin or wrongness, and often a deep and pathological pessimism. The Divided Man is one with inconstant and inconsistent instincts, sometimes to a very troublesome degree. What James writes about the Divided applies equally to the Sick: “In the haunting and insistent ideas, in the irrational impulses, the morbid scruples, dreads, and inhibitions which beset the psychopathic temperament when it is thoroughly pronounced, we have exquisite examples of heterogeneous personality.” **(VRE pp 167)** Both of these types of individuals are unable to overcome on their own the maladies that seem firmly established in their being: “In the extreme of melancholy the self that consciously is can do absolutely nothing. It is completely bankrupt and without resource, and no works it can accomplish will avail. Redemption from such subjective conditions must be a free gift or nothing...” **(VRE pp 239)**

The travails of the Sick Soul and Divided Man will be familiar to any alcoholic Big Book reader who has experienced the Four Horsemen of Terror, Bewilderment, Frustration and Despair, or pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization. Alcoholics have much in common with James’ Sick Soul and Divided Man, for “we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick.” **(BB pp 64)** Through personal stories, summaries of the A.A. pioneers’ experience and conclusions derived from them, powerlessness over alcohol in the bodily and mental sense is discussed at great length. The alcoholic reader is invited to see the plight of the doomed alcoholic as his own, and to grasp at the solution offered in later chapters. The other aspect of the First Step, unmanageability, is given comparatively little space, perhaps because the emotional and material effects of alcoholism are more obvious and harder to deny than its causes. Bill writes about Ebby’s situation and his own, emphasizing helplessness and hinting at a source of power that brought a solution to his friend:

Like myself, he [Ebby] had admitted complete defeat. Then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead, suddenly taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known!

Had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that minute; and this was none at all. **(BB pp 11)**

Dr. Bob faced similar circumstances at the end of his own drinking career. At the time Bill called upon him in Akron, Bob was said to be “was nearing the nadir of



alcoholic despair... He had a desperate desire to stop, but saw no way out, for he had earnestly tried many avenues of escape.” **(BB pp 155)** As a matter of note, this is the closest that the Big Book comes to using the now-common phrase ‘hitting bottom’. Speaking for the pioneers as a whole, the Big Book states that “Our human resources, as marshalled by the will, were not sufficient; they failed utterly.” **(BB pp 45)**

### Self-Will

William James writes that the man in crisis, being in a helpless state, cannot overcome his problems alone, and must rely on forces outside himself. Not only are his own efforts useless, they are a positive hindrance to any possible resolution:

We have used the vague and abstract language of psychology. But since, in any terms, the crisis described is the throwing of our conscious selves upon the mercy of powers which, whatever they may be, are more ideal than we are actually, and make for our redemption, you see why self-surrender has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life...

In other words, self-surrender becomes then indispensable. “The personal will,” says Dr. Starbuck, “must be given up. In many cases relief persistently refuses to come until the person ceases to resist, or to make an effort in the direction he desires to go.”...

[Dr.] Starbuck seems to put his finger on the root of the matter when he says that to exercise the personal will is still to live in the region where the imperfect self is the thing most emphasized. **(VRE pp 206-207, 204 and 206)**

The Big Book goes further on this score than James: not only does an emphasis on self or human will hinder the spiritual awakening needed for recovery from alcoholism, it is in fact *the very source of the problem*. Bill speaks of his unbridled ambition as being part of his downfall: “Out of this alloy of drink and speculation, I commenced to forge the weapon that one day would turn in its flight like a boomerang and all but cut me to ribbons.” Dr. Bob is more explicit when he declares that, “Unfortunately for me, I was the only child, which perhaps engendered the selfishness which played such an important part in bringing on my alcoholism.” Alcohol, we are told twice, is an effect **(BB pp 64 and 103)**, not the cause of the spiritual malady. Not only do both of A.A.’s founders blame selfishness for their alcoholism, the Big Book blames self-will for all the alcoholic’s problems:

Selfishness-self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt.

So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so. Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us!

God makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid. Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore, but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to. Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power. We had to have God's help. **(BB pp 62)**

In the Big Book, as in James, redemption is indeed 'a free gift or nothing.' Two paragraphs later, after accepting the idea of God being the director in life as an antidote for self-will, we see in the Third Step Promises **(BB pp 63)** the first signs of a spiritual awakening. Alcohol is barely mentioned after this point.

### **What Happened: Spiritual Awakening or Conversion**

James' discussion of the spiritual awakening, or what he calls 'conversion,' including the stages which precede it, is perhaps his most obvious and profound influence on AA. For example, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is mentioned by name twice in the Big Book, on Page 28 and in the appendix *Spiritual Experience*. Both citations refer to this type of spiritual or psychological change. James discusses it at great length, with this passage summarizing some of his thoughts:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about... **(VRE pp 180)**

While the life changing experience can be gradual or sudden,

“The older medicine used to speak of two ways, lysis and crisis, one gradual, the other abrupt, in which one might recover from a bodily disease. In the spiritual realm there are also two ways, one gradual, the other sudden, in which inner unification may occur... “ **(VRE pp 186)**

James focuses his attention almost solely on the sudden type of experience, as he finds it more illustrative for his purposes.

“Of the volitional [gradual] type of conversion it would be easy to give examples, but they are as a rule less interesting than those of the self-surrender [sudden] type, in which the subconscious effects are more abundant and often startling. I will therefore hurry to the latter, the more so because the difference between the two types is after all not radical. **(VRE 203-204)**

There are several detailed personal accounts of conversion experiences which James collected from various sources. He shares these to illuminate the emotional and psychological factors involved. Though all the stories involve religious ideas and motivations, James does not investigate them, treating the experiences as phenomenon to be explained scientifically. He uses rather clinical terms such as ‘mental rearrangements’, ‘changes in equilibrium’ and ‘changes in habitual centers of energy’ when referring to the results brought about by conversion experiences. James remains officially neutral as to the divine or psychological causes of the conversions:

“Now if you ask of psychology just how the excitement shifts in a man’s mental system, and why aims that were peripheral become at a certain moment central, psychology has to reply that although she can give a general description of what happens, she is unable in a given case to account accurately for all the single forces at work. Neither an outside observer nor the Subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one’s centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so.” **(VRE pp 193)**

However, he outlines at some length the mental processes by which they may have developed. Interestingly, two of the seven men whose stories are included recovered from alcoholism as a result of the conversion experience. James also makes a passing reference to other, entirely secular, conversion stories of recovered alcoholics that he did not include. **(Page 200)** A later passage shows that a conversion experience can directly impact recovery from alcoholism:

Every one knows cases of this incomplete and ineffective desire for reform, drunkards whom, with all their self-reproaches and resolves,

one perceives to be quite unwilling seriously to contemplate never being drunk again! Really to give up anything on which we have relied, to give it up definitively, ‘for good and all’ and forever, signifies one of those radical alterations of character which came under our notice in the lectures on conversion. **(VRE pp 314)**

The Big Book, having been written not by a scientist but primarily by a man who had a sudden conversion experience or spiritual awakening, does not discuss the mental processes by which it manifests itself. However, Bill leaves no doubt as to the source: “The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous.” **(BB pp 25)** Bill read Varieties of Religious Experience shortly after his experience **(BB pp 124-125)**, and surely had a personal motivation in this area that William James did not. The A.A. pioneers, along with Dr. Silkworth, an early medical friend of the fellowship came to feel that an awakening was crucial to recovery from alcoholism:

This [cycle of drinking and remorse] is repeated over and over, and unless this person can experience an entire psychic change there is very little hope of his recovery.

On the other hand-and strange as this may seem to those who do not understand-once a psychic change has occurred, the very same person who seemed doomed, who had so many problems he despaired of ever solving them, suddenly finds himself easily able to control his desire for alcohol, the only effort necessary being that required to follow a few simple rules.” **(BB pp xxvii)**

There are two firsthand accounts of spiritual awakenings in the Big Book, Bill’s and another at the end of We Agnostics. Both are sudden ones and they both result in recovery from alcoholism. Bill, like James, emphasizes the sudden type of experience with these stories and in some passages describing them. But where James sought to illustrate the phenomenon and inform his readers, Bill seeks to inspire his, many of whom need the same remedy he was granted.

### **Gradual Spiritual Awakening in the Big Book**

The emphasis on sudden awakening in the early big Book chapters created a need for the explanatory appendix Spiritual Experience, in which we find the second citation of Varieties of Religious Experience: “[S]uch transformations [”immediate and overwhelming”], though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the ‘educational variety’ because they develop slowly over a period of time.” Indeed, of the first three people in the AA story to get sober - Ebby, Bill and Dr. Bob -

only Bill had a sudden awakening.

The Big Book's Twelve Steps, which are suggested as a program of recovery, outline a gradual awakening that comes about 'as a result of these steps,' according to the Twelfth. James, in one of his few statements about gradual conversions, wrote, "In the volitional type the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits. But there are always critical points here at which the movement forward seems much more rapid." (**VRE pp 202**) As we shall soon see, several of the intermediate Steps contain predictions of emotional or spiritual growth, which correspond to these 'critical points'.

### **What it is like Now: State of Assurance or Realm of the Spirit**

James summarizes the findings from his own and others' research on the aftermath a conversion experience. The Big Book refers to this state as 'Realm of the Spirit' or the like (**See BB PP 46, 84 and 164**), while James calls it the 'state of assurance':

The characteristics of the affective experience which, to avoid ambiguity, should, I think, be called the state of assurance rather than the faith-state, can be easily enumerated...

The central one is the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well with one, the peace, the harmony, the willingness to be, even though the outer conditions should remain the same.

The second feature is the sense of perceiving truths not known before. The mysteries of life become lucid...

A third peculiarity of the assurance state is the objective change which the world often appears to undergo. 'An appearance of newness beautifies every object'... (**VRE 241-242**)

There are several passages in the early chapters of the Big Book that seemingly refer to sudden and overwhelming experiences. Most involve vast and wondrous changes, not incremental ones, which have come to the members of the fellowship. A great many of these changes fall under James' second characteristic, and still others under the third. For example, Bill said that he "was catapulted into what I like to call the fourth dimension of existence. I was to know happiness, peace, and usefulness, in a way of life that is incredibly more wonderful as time passes." Speaking for the A.A. pioneers generally: "[W]e have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe." (An asterisk in this passage refers the reader to the Spiritual Experience appendix.) Also, "Most of us feel we need look no further for Utopia. We have it with us right here

and now.” And, perhaps the strongest example:

Here are thousands of men and women, worldly indeed. They flatly declare that since they have come to believe in a Power greater than themselves, to take a certain attitude toward that Power, and to do certain simple things. There has been a revolutionary change in their way of living and thinking. In the face of collapse and despair, in the face of the total failure of their human resources, they found that a new power, peace, happiness, and sense of direction flowed into them. **(BB passages referenced are on pp 8, 25, 16 and 50)**

Among the Big Book Promises which outline the gradual awakening, we find many smaller, more specific descriptions of the changes one undergoes while taking the Steps: Recovery from alcoholism is a key element of the awakening, of course. This is also mentioned in the Fifth Step Promises **(BB pp 75)**, where we find this tentative prediction: “The feeling that the drink problem has disappeared will often come strongly.” This is later restated in no uncertain terms in the Tenth Step Promises, which declare that “[W]e have ceased fighting anything or anyone—even alcohol. For by this time sanity will have returned. We will seldom be interested in liquor... We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed.” Thus, the initial goal of taking the Steps has been accomplished by the Tenth. As we have already seen, recovery from alcoholism after conversion was a well known phenomenon to James.

There is also a ‘God’ component in the awakening, found at four points, beginning with the Step Three Promises **(BB pp 63)**: “As we felt new power flow in, as we enjoyed peace of mind, as we discovered we could face life successfully, as we became conscious of His presence, we began to lose our fear of today, tomorrow or the hereafter. We were reborn.” In the Step Five Promises , we see a stronger attachment to *God as we understood him*: “We begin to feel the nearness of our Creator. We may have had certain spiritual beliefs, but now we begin to have a spiritual experience... We feel we are on the Broad Highway, walking hand in hand with the Spirit of the Universe.” The twelfth and last of the Ninth Step Promises **(BB pp 83-84)** reads: “We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.” Finally, the Eleventh Step Promises **(BB pp 85)** continue the theme of closeness to God, reading in part, “If we have carefully followed directions, we have begun to sense the flow of His Spirit into us. To some extent we have become God-conscious. We have begun to develop this vital sixth sense.” The rest of this Step then goes on to discuss further developing this vital sense. These promises, or aspects of spiritual awakening, partially correspond to James’ second characteristic.

However, by far most of the individual changes in a gradual spiritual awakening

found in the Big Book Promises correspond to the first of James' characteristics. That is, they are largely concerned with thoughts and emotions in everyday life and the people, situations, etc that we encounter in our daily affairs. Most aspects of awakening are *secular or psychological in appearance*, not mystical or metaphysical. Not only are they observable phenomenon, they are also concerned with other observable phenomenon and our reactions to them, not with otherworldly ideas. For example, the Fourth Step Promises (**BB pp 70**) are entirely psychological in nature, as they relate to seeing the harmful nature of resentments and becoming more tolerant of those we had disliked. The Ninth Step Promises, the longest, best known and most wide-ranging set of promises, contains twelve changes to be expected. Eleven of these concern losing self-centeredness, fear, regret and the like while gaining hope, direction and happiness; only the last one is overtly spiritual, or God-centered - and even that involves *our perception of God, not the Divine itself*.

Even predominantly spiritual sets of Promises such as the Third and Fifth Step Promises contain secular and psychological aspects of awakening pertaining to everyday life. Only the Eleventh Step Promises, the last and shortest set of Promises in the Big Book, are entirely religious or spiritually oriented: indeed, that is the very subject of the penultimate Step.

James describes the general effect of spiritual awakening in a way that encompasses all its possible manifestations. One imagines that Bill W. approves:

[W]hat is attained is often an altogether new level of spiritual vitality, a relatively heroic level, in which impossible things have become possible, and new energies and endurances are shown. The personality is changed, the man is born anew... (**VRE pp 236**)

There are a number of passages in Varieties of Religious Experience with general spiritual insights. Some are collected in an Appendix below.

### III The influence of the Book of James on the Big Book and A.A.

The Biblical Book of James, believed by some to have been written by the brother of Jesus, is less than four full pages in the King James version of the New Testament, but has had a large impact on A.A. As we have already seen, the Founders were personally inspired by the Biblical James. **(DBATGOT pp 71)** It was also widely respected among the other A.A. pioneers:

As Dr. Bob described it, they were “convinced that the answer to our problem was in the Good Book. To some of us older ones, the parts that we found absolutely essential were the Sermon on the Mount, the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of First Corinthians, and the Book of James.” The Book of James was considered so important, in fact, that some early members even suggested “The James Club” as a name for the Fellowship. **(PIO pp 147)**

In addition to the general inspiration the pioneers felt, A.A.’s Steps and devotion to service for others were born of two major ideas from the Book of James. The first probably came indirectly through Oxford Group teachings, and can be found in chapter 5, verse 16: “Confess [your] faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” Being ‘healed’ through confession is consistent with the William James/A.A. idea of spiritual awakening, and is reflected in the Big Book’s Fifth Step Promises **(pp 75)**. Bill, an Oxford Group member, as were Ebby and Dr. Bob, is quoted as saying:

Agreeing with James in the New Testament, they [the Oxford Group] thought people ought to confess their sins ‘one to another.’ Heavily emphasizing this wholesale sort of personal housecleaning, they called the process ‘sharing.’ Not only were things to be confessed, something was to be done about them. This usually took the form of what they called restitution, the restoration of good personal relationships by making amends for harms done. **(PIO pp 128)**

Many Oxford principles, such as the Four Absolutes (Absolute Honesty, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love and Absolute Purity.), were not widely practiced in A.A. after it separated from the Group. But confession, which implies a personal inventory, and restitution were retained and included as part of the Big Book’s recovery program. Thus we see that A.A.’s Steps Four, Five and Nine are derived in part from the Oxford Group’s practices based on their interpretation of this passage in James. Undoubtedly, these practices were kept because their effectiveness, but their survival in the new fellowship may have been ensured by the early members’ devotion to the Biblical Book of James.

The second idea that A.A. adopted from the Book of James is embodied in the well-known phrase from this passage:

Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may



say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that **faith without works is dead? James 2:17 - 20** [Emphasis added]

This phrase appears word for word three times in the Big Book. One instance is in the context of the amends envisioned by the Oxford Group and adopted by A.A.: “Now we need more action, without which we find that ‘Faith without works is dead.’ Let’s look at Steps Eight and Nine.” The other two uses refer to the Twelfth Step. The first instance, both temporally and in its location in the Big Book, can be found in Ebby’s message to Bill: “Particularly was it imperative that I work with others as he had worked with me. Faith without works was dead, he said.” Finally, Bill writes at the end of chapter six after the discussion of Step Eleven, “But this is not all. There is action and more action. ‘Faith without works is dead.’ The next chapter is entirely devoted to Step Twelve.” **(Passages quoted above are on pp 76, 14 and 88, respectively)**

Faith is vital and alive when it inspires certain acts which testify to its effect on us. Acting upon spiritual principles is assumed in A.A., for the Twelve Steps are called a ‘program of action’, and the Big Book chapter containing the bulk of this program is entitled Into Action. Not only does action keep faith alive, in A.A. it keeps alcoholics themselves alive, for we see these statements: “Faith has to work twenty-four hours a day in and through us, or we perish.” and “The spiritual life is not a theory. *We have to live it.*” (The latter is another reference to Step Nine.) **(BB pp 16 and 83)**

This idea was certainly not a theory to the Founders; it was part of their personal histories. A friend is quoted as saying that “The revelation in Dr. Bob’s life came when he made his second discovery: that spirituality couldn’t be absorbed by someone emulating a sponge, but that one might find it in healing and helping to free those afflicted and in bondage.” The doctor himself said, “I think the kind of service that really counts is giving of yourself, and that almost invariably requires effort and time... And I think that’s what Bill learned in New York and I didn’t learn in Akron until we met.” **(Both quotes from DBATGOT pp 307)**

The newfound faith of both A.A. Founders actually did come alive when accompanied by such works.

#### IV The A.A. Legacy of William James and the Book of James

William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, describes the emotional and spiritual plight of several men in crisis, and the conversion experiences that provided solutions for them. Bill W.'s personal history matches this pattern closely, and his exposure to James shortly after his own conversion experience showed him the importance of what he had just gone through. With the goal of having a spiritual awakening in mind, Bill realized that certain stages must occur beforehand to help make it possible. James' influence here, along with others', is recognized in Bill W's A.A.'s official biography:

The basic material for the chapter [How It Works, which discusses self-will and Steps Three and Four] was the word-of-mouth program that Bill had been talking ever since his own recovery. It was heavy with Oxford Group principles, and had in addition some of the ideas Bill had gleaned from William James and from Dr. Silkworth...

Bill's first three steps were culled from his reading of [William] James, the teachings of Sam Shoemaker [Minister and Oxford Group member, Ebby lived in his mission], and those of the Oxford Group. **(PIO pp 196-197, 199)**

Having recognized his helplessness and the problem of self-will, the alcoholic can begin taking certain measures toward attaining a spiritual experience. As we have just seen, some of these Steps have come about through the influence of the Biblical Book of James. A.A.'s idea of action is interwoven with this book. The Biblical James helped inspire the three Steps which absolutely require the participation of other human beings, and which involve outward action: Five, Nine and Twelve. Step Five (along with the personal inventory it implies) and Step Nine are the chief means of overcoming self and realizing the awakening needed for recovery from alcoholism:

This thought brings us to STEP TEN, which suggests we continue to take personal inventory and continue to set right any new mistakes as we go along. We vigorously commenced this way of living as we cleaned up the past. We have entered the world of **the Spirit**. [Emphasis added] **(BB pp 84)**

Having entered the Realm of the Spirit (attained awakening) after cleaning up the past in Step Nine, the Twelfth Step suggests an ongoing effort in reaching out to others in need in the spirit of service and giving. Thus the cycle of recovery is created and maintained through contemplation partially inspired by William James, and action indirectly motivated by the Book of James.

## **Appendix: Spiritual Principles in James**

In discussing many aspects of spiritual life and thought in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James makes certain observations that are worthy of consideration in their own right:

The memory of an insult may make us angrier than the insult did when we received it. We are frequently more ashamed of our blunders afterwards than we were at the moment of making them... **Page 53**

Evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease, which only adds to the original complaint. **Page 125**

General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, considers that the first vital step in saving outcasts consists in making them feel that some decent human being cares enough for them to take an interest in the question whether they are to rise or sink. **Page 200, Footnote**

Our spiritual judgment, I said, our opinion of the significance and value of a human event or condition, must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. If the fruits for life of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it. **Page 232**

But just as our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of things material, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so might be our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them. The hubbub of the waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain ajar or open. **Page 237**

Nothing annihilates an inhibition as irresistibly as anger does it; for, as Moltke says of war, destruction pure and simple is its essence. This is what makes it so invaluable an ally of every other passion. **Page 259**

Next, experience shows that there are times in every one's life when one can be

better counseled by others than by one's self. Inability to decide is one of the commonest symptoms of fatigued nerves; friends who see our troubles more broadly, often see them more wisely than we do; so it is frequently an act of excellent virtue to consult and obey a doctor, a partner, or a wife. **Page 305**

But in this course of lectures ecclesiastical institutions hardly concern us at all. The religious experience which we are studying is that which lives itself out within the private breast. **Page 328**

“The spiritual life,” he writes, “justifies itself to those who live it; but what can we say to those who do not understand? This, at least, we can say, that it is a life whose experiences are proved real to their possessor, because they remain with him when brought closest into contact with the objective realities of life. Dreams cannot stand this test. We wake from them to find that they are but dreams. Wanderings of an overwrought brain do not stand this test. These highest experiences that I have had of God's presence have been rare and brief - flashes of consciousness which have compelled me to exclaim with surprise - God is here! - or conditions of exaltation and insight less intense, and only gradually passing away. **Page 388, quoting from Autobiography of J. Trevor**

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe. Along with the consciousness of the cosmos there occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence - would make him almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking, and more important than is the enhanced intellectual power. With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already.” **Page 389-390, Dr. R. M. Bucke**

For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun; he has exteriorized his rottenness. If he has not actually got rid of it, he at least no longer smears it over with a hypocritical show of virtue - he lives at least upon a basis of veracity. **Page 452**

It may well prove that the sphere of influence in prayer is subjective exclusively, and that what is immediately changed is only the mind of the praying person. But however our opinion of prayer's effects may come to be limited by criticism,

religion, in the vital sense in which these lectures study it, must stand or fall by the persuasion that effects of some sort genuinely do occur. Through prayer, religion insists, things which cannot be realized in any other manner come about... **Page 455-456**

When we see all things in God, and refer all things to him, we read in common matters superior expressions of meaning. The deadness with which custom invests the familiar vanishes, and existence as a whole appears transfigured. **Page 465**

It is impossible, in the present temper of the scientific imagination, to find in the driftings of the cosmic atoms, whether they work on the universal or on the particular scale, anything but a kind of aimless weather, doing and undoing, achieving no proper history, and leaving no result. **Page 481**

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticises it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exist. Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ... He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck. **Page 498-499**

Meanwhile the practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably even be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with no absolute unity realized in it at all. **Page 515**