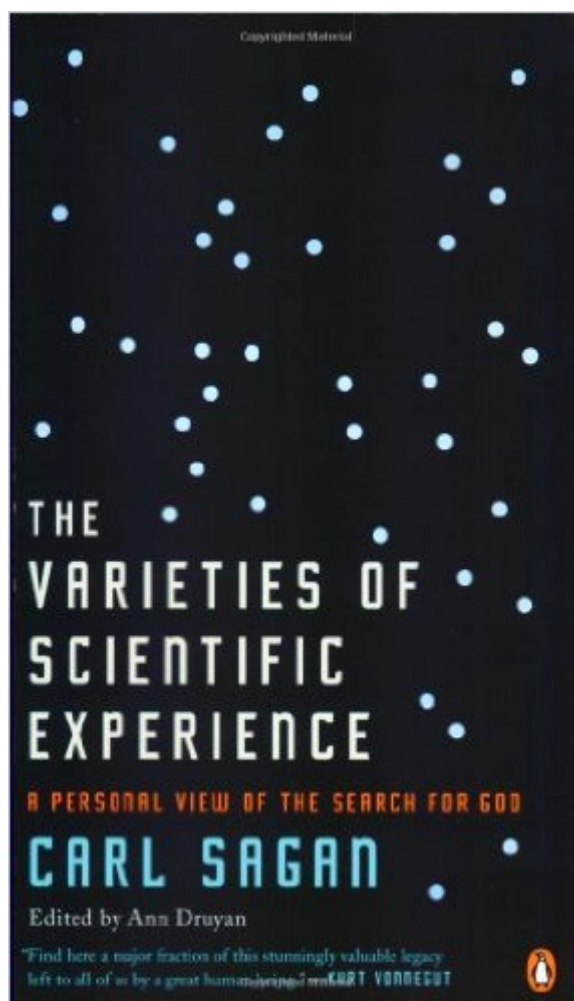


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The Varieties Of Scientific Experience: A Personal View Of The Search For God



Synopsis

Carl Sagan's prophetic vision of the tragic resurgence of fundamentalism and the hope-filled potential of the next great development in human spirituality. The late great astronomer and astrophysicist describes his personal search to understand the nature of the sacred in the vastness of the cosmos. Exhibiting a breadth of intellect nothing short of astounding, Sagan presents his views on a wide range of topics, including the likelihood of intelligent life on other planets, creationism and so-called intelligent design, and a new concept of science as "informed worship." Originally presented at the centennial celebration of the famous Gifford Lectures in Scotland in 1985 but never published, this book offers a unique encounter with one of the most remarkable minds of the twentieth century.

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Customer Reviews

++++Former professor of astronomy & space sciences and former director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell University Dr. Carl Sagan (Nov. 1934 to Dec. 1996) has risen from the dead to write a book on his search for God!! Well, not quite. Sagan's third wife & widow and his longtime collaborator Ann "Annie" Druyan has turned his 1985 lectures (formally entitled the "Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology") that he presented at the University of Glasgow in Scotland into a fascinating book. Astronomer and the Sagan's dear friend Steven Soter wrote scientific updates that appear in the book's footnotes and, as well, he made "many editorial contributions." The purpose of these lectures as Druyan tells us is as follows: "Carl saw these lectures as a chance to set down in

detail his understanding of the relationship between religion and science and something of his own search to understand the nature of the sacred."But exactly why did Druyan turn these lectures into a book (which she edited)? Here's her answer:"In the midst of the worldwide pandemic of extreme fundamentalist violence and during a time in the United States when phony piety in public life reached a new low and the critical separation of church and state and public classroom were dangerously eroded, I felt that Carl's perspective on these questions was needed for than ever."Thank goodness that she thought this way because she has given all of us a valuable book to be cherished, "a...stunningly valuable legacy left to all of us by a great human being." For those who have followed Sagan's writings in the past, the science he presents will be familiar and easy to follow.

Science's esteemed friend Carl Sagan died prematurely in 1996. What a pleasure it is to read more of his crystal clear prose. In these transcripts of his 1985 Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology at the University of Glasgow, he gives us his rich insights on the relationship between science and religion. William James had a turn in the early 20th century and turned his lectures into the acclaimed "Varieties of Religious Experiences." "Varieties of Scientific Experiences" is edited by Sagan's widow and collaborator Ann Druyan and she acknowledges his admiration for James in the title of this book. Starting with cosmology, Sagan leads us through a naturalistic view of the universe - meaning except for the most extreme liberal interpretation of God, He is not part of the equation. But the believer who desires the bigger picture should not be scared off - this eloquent book is more considerate and gentle than the recent books on religion by Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett. As usual with Sagan, it is also a treatise on why we should view our world with a scientific, rational mind-set. Sagan's bottom line was always: "Show me the evidence." In an interview, Sagan was once pressed by a reporter for a premature conclusion. When asked, "But what's your gut feeling," Sagan replied, "I try not to think with my gut." I spent a whole day being stimulated and intrigued by this book and there is not a dull page. An 11th century Hindu logician presented the following proofs for the Hindu "all-knowing and imperishable but not necessarily omnipotent and compassionate God":1. First cause - sounds familiar2. Argument from atomic combinations - bonding of atoms requires a conscious agent3. Argument from suspension of the world - somebody has to be holding it up4.

I would love to spend a paragraph or two on how lucky we were and are to have had Carl Sagan among us. Of course, anyone reading this review likely already knows that this is true and the extent of its truth. So, I will get to the point. This is a very impressive posthumous collection of Sagan's

Gifford's lectures where he talks about the intersection (or lack thereof) of science and religion. Most importantly, he talks about how the religious experience - more appropriately, the experience of extreme awe at our surroundings - is more apt for science than in religion. Where religious awe and wonderment revels in mystery, scientific awe acknowledges the mystery and goes about extirpate that mystery via some explanation. Whereas religion's version of solving a problem is to postulate magic, science's version of solving problems involves solving them with evidence. The first few essays are about the idea of the 'religious experience' - the acknowledgement of how small we are and how vast is the universe; the acknowledgement of how sublime all of our surroundings truly are. But science, suggests Sagan, seeks to find out about those surrounding, while religion revels in the idea of the 'incomprehensible.' There is an essay that continues this theme by postulating on the possible NATURALISTIC origins of life. While we have not solved the puzzle, Sagan walks us through very plausible examples of how the chemical process COULD HAVE gone (certainly more plausible than an infinitely complex god deciding to create all of this, by which you then have to explain how THAT god arose.) Another essay exposes the very embarrassing 'proofs' of god that theologians have come up with through the years.

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