A hundred years ago, the writer and philosopher William James wrote The Varieties of Religious Experience, a seminal work that has inspired generations of scholars and eccentrics alike. James’s book argues that the religious spirit in man is best understood through the study of its most extreme forms. Varieties was a watershed effort: a bestselling portrait of history’s pluralism and a defense of the spiritual quest, in all its guises, against the era’s increasingly secular sentiments.

Today, with all the old tensions between skeptics and believers still in place, J. C. Hallman pays homage to James’s exploration of offbeat religious movements. But where James relied on the testimony and biographies of prophets and mystics, Hallman travels directly to some of America’s newest and most unusual religions, trekking from Druid circles in the mossy hills of northern California to the gleaming mother church of Scientology, from lurid satanic cellars in undisclosed locations to a professional-wrestling ministry in the fundamentalist heart of Texas. Along the way, he participates in a variety of rites and reports on a broad spectrum of beliefs. Eventually Hallman adopts James as his patron saint, spiritual adviser, and intellectual companion on the journey that will culminate in the creation of this book, a compelling combination of adventure and biography, spotted with hair-raising predicaments and rife with poignant portraits of unforgettable characters, including William James himself.

The Devil Is a Gentleman maps the spiritual contours of modern American pluralism and examines the life and legacy of one of its most profound architects.

My Personal Review:
Having taught both theology and philosophy and having been a member of a monastic community, I approached JC Hallman's The Devil Is a Gentleman with a skeptical but open mind. William James had not been one of my most favorite studies in my educational experiences. In fact, the only class I ever received anything below a "B" in was a course on James. The man for me was way too complex; way out of touch and simply put, strange.

Once I began The Devil Is a Gentleman, things began to change as Mr. Hallman captured my heart and my mind in his wonderful combination of philosophy, biography and prose. I was caught in the rare situation of not wanting to put the book down, but needing to in order to spend time digesting all that JC was giving me! I was afraid Mr. Hallman was going to do nothing more than share the titillating side of the fringe movement in America. I was concerned from the title that Mr. Hallman would make a case for the Devil. And, I was also worried of being put to sleep with William James.

However, to my sheer joy, JC was able to give a wide variety of the fringe movement their day in the sun, while balancing fact with personal opinion. His intimate sharing of his encounters with people such as Celeste Appel at Unarius, the healer Rhiannon, Chris and AJ and the rest of the CWF, Uncle Draggi, Dwayne, and Brother Stash at New Skete all draw you into the experience of what both James and Hallman would call today's fringe. (After finishing the book, I have made contact with New Skete to schedule my own visit.)

But what was most delightful in the JC Hallman's construct was the parallel development of James' journey and Hallman's own journey. Not only do you come away with knowing both James' and Hallman on a deeper level, Hallman is able to relate James' complex philosophical and psychological concepts to life in twenty-first century America.

By the end of the book, I was wishing I was back in the classroom again, so that I could assign Hallman's book to a group of new freshman as they began their "spiritual" journey. Hallman's book would be fantastic in "quest for meaning" or "fundamentals of belief" courses. But, just with many online academies today, JC Hallman's book is your private companion as you explore and begin your own deeper journey. This book is a must for anyone who has ever questioned the existence of God; the relevance of religion or their membership in institutional church. Thanks to Hallman's true gift as a writer, one is able to ask important questions while being completely comfortable in experiencing life without words!