In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) American psychologist William James delivered twenty academic lectures as the Gifford Lecturer on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburg that aruges that natural theology is limited in observing religious experiences. He undertakes the monumental task of examining a wide range of religious experiences ranging from Buddhism, Christian and Muslim mystics, Transcendentalists, Protestant Reformers, and Roman Catholicism. However, the greatest volume of his research and interaction is within the Christian religious community.

The foundation and process of his methodology begins with the field of psychology. He writes, “I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist. Psychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed” (p. 12). He applies his psychological training to observe, investigate, and engage with primarily a large volume of manuscripts provided by Edwin D. Starbuck of Stanford University spanning centuries of personal accounts of religious experiences once they occur.

He is not interested in the ontological argument of the Divine, but rather focuses on an individual’s religious existential experience and behavioral (or “fruits” as James labels it) differences it makes in his/her life. While James does provide some universal similarities amongst world religions, he spends a disproportionate amount of time within the Christian tradition.

As was his presentation style, each lecture began with a brief summation of the previous lecture followed by the intent of the current lecture. James would use large written accounts of an individual’s religious experience and examine it according to the focus of each lecture. Following the examination of the experience, he would provide scholarly analysis. Finally, he would provide his conclusions of the religious experience according to natural religion.

In order to examine one’s religious experience, James begins with a biological approach to the predisposition of an individual’s religious experience. In his second lecture, he defines religious experience as “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” (p.36). Next he articulates the cognitive necessity in believing not only that the Divine or “unseen” exists, but the religious experience is a direct response to the unseen.

As mentioned above, James’ analysis focuses on the changed behavior during and after a religious event. He articulates that the fruit of happiness that comes with the experience is proof of its truth (p.77). However the road to happiness is a long process with tensions within the life of the religions. James begins this journey with natural religion’s contribution to what he calls “Healthy Mindedness” (Lecture IV and V). The goal of the healthy mindset it to overcome the morbidness in what James labels the “Sick Soul.”

The lectures on the sick soul analyze the ongoing tension between the happiness that is derived in the temporary moment of the religious experience and her/his encounter with suffering and prolonged suffering in particular. For James, it is this individual crisis which leads to what he calls conversion or moral change. A moral change from one who believes himself/herself to be divided and consciously unhappy to one who is now consciously whole and happy.

William James now turns his attention to investigate the “fruits” or behavioral changes that can be empirically observed and recorded. He uses the term saintliness to describe the manifestation of religious experience on the life of practitioners. Manifestations like asceticism, strength of soul, purity, charity, brotherly love, and loving one’s enemies are amongst the fruits he examines. He concludes his investigation with what he believes are the values of being saintly like devoutness, purity, tenderness, charity, and intellectual ability.

After laying the ground work of neurology, the tension of a divided, sick soul which leads to a conversion and a changed cognitive and behavioral life style, William James now investigates and observes the ultimate fringe examples of religious experience know as mysticism. Williams defines mysticism with four general characteristics: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity (p.343). Early in his lectures he briefly discussed how an observer knows if a person has indeed experienced something real or simply had a psychotic episode. James returns to this line of inquiry, but this time his methodology asks the question about whether or not the religious experience of mysticism can be reproduced outside of a religious occurrence. One observation which was profound to him was that a majority of mystical experiences occurred outdoors (p.355).

He continues his lecture series focusing on whether or not philosophy can either prove or disprove any religious experience as true or not true. James proceeds to reveal the limitations of short comings and inadequacies of philosophy when observing a religious experience. He argues that what makes philosophy inadequate in and of itself is that faith is too private and individualistic, and the energy that allows one to cognitively and behaviorally change is beyond his philosophic approach (p.387). James concludes by articulating that intellectualism is inherent in any religious experience. Whether they be myths, superstitions, or creeds, they provide the bridge between the unseen and the experienced. The one area where he believes philosophy is most vulnerable is dealing with the First Cause (p.394) or the *a priori*.

Therefore James returns to empirical philosophy—“the true is what works well, even though the qualification ‘on the whole’ may always have to be added” (p.411). Here he provides examples of the Christian disciplines of confession and prayer. Prayer, according to James, is “the very soul and essence of religion” (p.416). It is where the divine meets an individual on her/his journey to overcome the sick soul or the divided self: A conversion which changes the cognitive and behavioral lifestyle of a person while they encounter sufferings in her/his life. William James would consider this a truthful religious experience.

James concludes by making two important observations. The true specialists about natural religion are not the ones who are attending the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902. The specialists, according to William James, are the people they observe to understand. The second observation was that “knowledge about a thing is not the thing itself” (p.438). Empirical science doesn’t capture the link between the specialist and the practitioner’s actual encounter with the Divine. Finally, he concludes on a more personal note that “We and God have business with each other; and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled” (p.461)