

Smart, Ninian. "Understanding Religious Experience." Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis. Ed. Steven T. Katz. New York, Oxford University Press, 1978. 10-21.

*This is the first of a series of presentations on the book cited above; Prof. Smart's is the opening essay in the book. Future essays will be presented as I can pull together time and focus. In this first I will not engage it personally, rather simply present the essay without comment.*

Smart's analysis opens considering the phrase "understanding religious experience." While understanding may be frequently considered as all or none, Smart points out that there are degrees of understanding. This applies particularly to understanding the religious experience of another religious tradition. While one's understanding may be limited, one need not *a priori* conclude that the religious experience of a tradition other than one's own is unintelligible.

Smart goes on to distinguish two different sorts of understanding, the existential understanding of something, and the explanatory (or theoretical) understanding of something. The existential understanding is the subjective nature of a given experience, such as the experience of torture by electric shock. The explanatory understanding is the reasons why something happened. Here he cites the apostle Paul's Damascus road conversion. There may be different explanatory theories, which might overlap and/or conflict. A central question resulting from the above is whether it is possible to have adequate theoretical understanding of a religious experience without existential experience.

He then poses the question about what might qualify as a religious experience. While some experiences do happen within religious traditions, some happen "out of the blue", and are sometimes the reason for one joining a religious tradition. He also notes that the distinctions between religion and a well-defined ideology, such as Maoism, cannot be rigidly drawn, and ideological practice may well have a religious-like experiential component.

Smart also considers that there are some life experiences, perhaps most centrally death, which have religious significance, completely apart from any particular religious tradition.

Finally, some non-religious experiences may have religious significance. A monastic tradition may emphasize the devotional aspects of everyday work, such as gardening or washing dishes, without the work itself being religious *per se*.

Smart goes on to distinguish roughly between inner mysticism and mystical experience as happening within a contemplative tradition, whether Jewish, Christian, Hindu or other, and outer "numinous" experiences such as those described in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. This opens up a further discussion in which Smart turns extended attention to the matter of classification and categorization of different experiences. In difference with R.C. Zaehner, who sharply distinguishes between theistic (i.e. Christian, Jewish, Islamic) and monistic (i.e. Yogic, Hindu or Buddhist) mysticism, Smart sees rather that such a categorization tends to gloss over significant differences within the theistic and monistic traditions. Particularly, there may be less distance between certain theistic and monistic traditions than between others considered monistic.

Smart considers a possible objection that his distinction depends upon the difference between

direct experience and doctrinal interpretation. Since there is no such thing as an uninterpreted experience, Smart's distinctions based upon doctrinal interpretation may not hold. Smart's response is that there are differing degrees of interpretation; his is an attempt to fully engage a phenomenological analysis of mystics' reports, "...since the existential impact and sacred context of the inner visions can naturally lead to wider claims for them than the phenomenology might warrant" (14). He notes here that the comparative study of the factual content of religion and religions is crucial. The study of mysticism is largely an empirical process, and knowledge of the factual content of various religions is necessary to that end.

Smart then shifts to consider the limits of understanding religious experience, returning to his earlier question of the necessity of having had an experience in order to understand it. His first question considered is this: "Could one have an adequate understanding of a type of religious experience if one has never had it?" (15). The focus of his response is upon the word *adequate*: just what constitutes adequacy to discuss origin and validity?

Here Smart argues from the possible similarity of experiences that we may be able to understand by analogy. Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, argues for religious experience as *sui generis*, yet he ironically illustrates the nature of numinous experience by the clever use of illustrations. Smart draws from this that mystical experience may not be so utterly different that it cannot be understood, at least in limited fashion for analysis, by the use of the imagination trying to follow the descriptions of various mystics.

He then considers an objection that mystics frequently describe their experiences as "ineffable", "indescribable," "inexpressible," and so forth; Smart responds that such expressions do not preclude indescribability. One reason is ambiguity; that God is incomprehensible must mean more that God is not totally comprehensible, rather than totally incomprehensible. If the latter were true, nothing about God could be known at all, even of his possible existence. Another reason is that similar expressions are used in non-religious contexts, such as "Words simply cannot express my gratitude"; there are many non-religious occasions where the subjective experience is not expressible. Smart calls this "performative transcendence," or performatively using words to express intent beyond the usual or customary content of such words. The ontological transcendence of the object being described does not preclude description by analogy within the things of the world; if this were true we would be reduced to utter silence, as we could know nothing, analogically, mediately or immediately. One direct cite seems worthy of summary note: "It is incorrect to conclude either that ineffability is a unique characteristic of religious experience or that it is absolute (for herein lies contradiction)" (19).

Finally, Smart considers that religious experience may only properly be understood within a theory that can also judge the validity of the experience, that is, "understanding religious experience requires commitment" (20). He acknowledges that there may be truth in this, but prior to fully yielding to it Smart counters that there is much yet to be done from a phenomenological analysis to disentangle different religious experiences, understand the degree of interpretation in description, locate them in a cultural milieu, and understand their existential import.

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