Ramified Interpretations and Mediated Experiences: A Comparison

Steven Katz and Ninian Smart, while agreeing that a *philosophia perennis* does not exist among the world’s religions, nonetheless come to radically different conclusions about the nature of mystical experience. This paper will attempt to explore the theories of these two scholars and the possible origins of their divergent conclusions.

Ninian Smart was the H.G. Wood Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham at the time he wrote his essay\(^1\) on the role of interpretation in the mystical experience. A self-described “Buddhist-Episcopalian” and scholar of the world’s religions for almost 50 years before his death in 2000, he concluded at the end of his 1965 essay that:

1. Phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same.
2. Different flavours, however, accrue to the experiences of mystics because of their ways of life and modes of auto-interpretation.
3. The truth of interpretation depends in large measure on factors extrinsic to the mystical experience itself.\(^2\)

and he reiterated this point in an interview in April 1999: “I believe strongly that the mysticism of all the religions is just about the same.”\(^3\)

Steven Katz was the Associate Professor of Religion at Dartmouth College when he wrote his essay on the epistemology of the mystical experience. A scholar of religion and of Judaism in particular, Katz’ 1978 essay was essentially “a plea for the recognition of differences” between the forms of the mystical experience, and ultimately, between each individual mystical experience.\(^4\) Katz directly opposed the theories of several leading scholars of

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\(^1\) Smart, 1965. Page 75.
\(^2\) *op. cit.* Page 87.
mysticism in his paper, foremost among them W. T. Stace and R. C. Zaehner, who believed that a typology of mysticism was a workable proposition.\(^5\) Smart’s theory of “ramified interpretation” and his conclusion quoted above were also addressed; Katz feels that Smart’s conclusion is “phenomenologically as well as philosophically suspect” and that the “forcing [of] multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretative categories… [loses] sight of the fundamentally important differences between the data studied.”\(^6\)

Smart’s theory of the interpretation of the mystical experience rests on the concept of “degrees of ramification” within any such interpretation. That is, he understands there to be relative degrees to which an interpretation of a mystical experience participates in the assumption that certain doctrinal statements are true. For instance, he notes that “the term ‘God’ in the Christian context gains part at least of its characteristic meaning from such doctrinal statements as: ‘God created the universe’, ‘Jesus Christ is God’, ‘God has acted in history’, etc.”\(^7\) This sort of ramification, especially when taken to a high degree, results in an interpretation of the experience that is to some degree removed from the actual experience; Smart feels that when fewer words carrying a cultural, religious, or value-based meaning or presupposition along with them are used, the interpreter will come closer to a phenomenologically true understanding of a mystical experience.

Under Smart’s theory, a Vedantin who experienced identification with \textit{saguna Brahman} would be having an experience no different from a Christian or Muslim mystic who experienced unity with God. Indeed, the experience would be identical, stemming from the same source, but their interpretations would differ according to their cultural affiliations. He would experience a

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\(^6\) \textit{op. cit.}  
\(^7\) Smart, 1965. Page 79.
feeling of unity with a Being who was Other and had various positive attributes, and since he was raised as a Vedantin in a Hindu environment, he would only be able to describe that experience in the terms readily available to his mind, formed around the Vedas: “I have discovered *saguna Brahman*, and he is my own Self” or some such.

In fact, Smart might say that when a theoretical interpretation of each experience was made in non-ramified terms, the description would be identical. Such an interpretation remains in the realm of the theoretical because a non-ramified description is currently impossible, our human languages presently lacking the appropriate vocabulary due to inadequate understanding of the mechanisms of mysticism.

Smart also distinguishes between “auto-interpretation” and “hetero-interpretation”, i.e. interpretation of a mystical experience by the mystic himself and interpretation of the mystic’s described experience by an unrelated party. Thus, says Smart, there are four categories into which an interpretation can fall:

1) Auto-interpretation with a low degree of ramification.
2) Auto-interpretation with a high degree of ramification.
3) Hetero-interpretation with a low degree of ramification.
4) Hetero-interpretation with a high degree of ramification.\(^8\)

Smart feels that the most accurate interpretation of a mystical experience can be found by finding a hetero-interpretation with a low degree of ramification that coincides closely with an auto-interpretation that also has a low degree of ramification. He believes that this will provide the closest possible account of what was really experienced.\(^9\)

Katz, on the other hand, believes that there is no such thing as an “unmediated experience” — i.e. an experience which is not processed by or filtered through some sort of epistemological structure built out of a lifetime of accumulated cultural values, beliefs,

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\(^8\) Smart, 1965. Page 81.
\(^9\) *op. cit.*
assumptions, and feelings— in the first place. This sort of mediation of experience, Katz believes, does not happen independently from the experience, as Smart’s theory of interpretation would posit, but rather comprises an intrinsic part of the experience itself. Thus, as he says, “the Hindu mystic does not have an experience of x which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience.” That is to say that he does not merely “have an experience consistent with monistic mystical experiences” or even “feel at one with the universe” and then interpret that experience according to Hindu norms but rather that, as the experience itself is mediated to his consciousness through the epistemological framework that he has built out of his immersion in the Hindu culture and religion, it is actually experienced as Brahman.

The difference between “ramified interpretations” and “mediated experience” is subtle but important from a phenomenological perspective – especially when the question at hand is “is a typology of mystical experiences possible?” rather than “what is the origin of the mystical experience?” as it is in these essays. Where Smart and Katz differ is in their understanding of the ontology of the experience itself. Smart seems to be operating under the assumption that a mystical experience is an objective thing with objective qualities, existing entirely independently of the mystic himself. Katz, by saying that an experience cannot exist independent of the experiencer, argues from a philosophical perspective that the mystic experience cannot ever be the same for any two people because experiences do not exist prior to being experienced, in which process the experience comes into existence with the attributes appropriate to the experiencer.
It may also be noted that while Smart implicitly claims that in some way mystical experiences can be validated or verified, Katz admits explicitly that while mystic experiences are perfectly capable of being actual occurrences, there are

…major, perhaps insuperable, problems involved in the issue of trying to verify mystical claims, if by verification we mean the strong thesis that independent grounds for the claimed event/experience can be publicly demonstrated.10

This seems to me to be very much the case, as a non-ramified interpretation of any mystical experience is not a possibility; all we can be provided with (from the perspective of Smart) are individual interpretations participating in some degree of ramification, and from Katz’s perspective there is never a non-interpreted, non-mediated experience to begin with.

Katz’s approach seems more valid from a philosophical perspective, since there is no way to conceive of an experience independent of the person who is experiencing it, no way to define its attributes without processing it through a sensorium complete with “cultural baggage”. The interpretation of a mystical experience will still occur somewhere along Smart’s spectrum of ramification depending on the interpretive framework that the mystic possesses (from the starkly materialistic biochemical basis used by Eugene D’Aquili and Andrew Newberg11 to the explicitly Roman Catholic interpretations of Zaehner12, for instance), but the experiences themselves will differ between mystics as well.

Smart’s conclusion that “mysticism is everywhere the same”, with which Katz disagrees, seems to stem from the second half of his essay in which he examines Zaehner’s categories of “theistic” and “monistic” mysticism, and concludes that there is no basis for differentiating between the two. He takes for granted, however, that a typology along Zaehner’s

11 See bibliography.
lines is possible and worthwhile. Finding that the distinction between theistic and monistic mysticism is negligible, then, he concludes that “phenomenologically, mysticism is everywhere the same.” The jump from “mystic experiences should be categorized into types” to “the types given are not ontologically distinct” to “therefore, all mystic experiences are essentially the same, only the interpretations differ” is not clear. In addition, this conclusion not only assumes that mystical experiences can and should be ordered into types, it completely ignores the category of “panenhenic or nature mysticism” which he earlier agrees is a valuable and correct concept. One would assume, therefore, that when he speaks of mysticism being “everywhere the same”, he is referring only to the introvertive sort of mysticism he focuses on in the rest of the article.

Katz not only finds that Smart’s blurring the line between theistic and monistic mysticism is an unjust treatment of the differences between the two categories, he concludes that the original division (made by Zaehner) between the two categories was “overly simplistic and reductionistic.” As Katz mentions, the differences between various forms that Zaehner categorizes as “monistic” and forms that are put in the “theistic” category are significant and make the types inadequate to their task. He compares Christian and Jewish mystic experiences, which are both categorized as “theistic” by Zaehner, but which take vastly different forms, as well as a number of other traditions falling into one of Zaehner’s types, each of which present differences that Katz feels deserve to be recognized.

Katz’s argument has many merits, not the least of which is that some forms of mysticism do not easily fit into even such broad categories as Zaehner’s. Buddhism is one mentioned

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14 *op. cit.* Page 87.
15 *op. cit.* Page 76.
17 *op. cit.* Page 32.
specifically by Katz; it is not theistic, not believing in any sort of Higher Being, but it is also not really monistic, as it believes not so much that there is One Thing in which everyone and everything participates, but that in the final analysis there is really No Thing at all.

I also question Smart’s principle whereby the most true account of a mystical experience would be gained through the close coincidence of a hetero-interpretation and an auto-interpretation, each with a low degree of ramification. It would seem to me that an auto-interpretation, having only one set of cultural values applied to it, is closer to the truth in a phenomenological sense than is a hetero-interpretation made by an outsider, who receives the culturally-influenced report of the experience and then adds his own cultural spin to his interpretation. That is, I question why an interpretation made by an outsider according to the mystic’s description of his experience should be any closer to the actual phenomenon than would be an interpretation made by the mystic himself – after all, even under Smart’s definitions, neither would be free of cultural influence; the outside interpreter may perhaps have an interpretive framework with a more familiar ethnocentric basis, but mere familiarity does not imply greater accuracy.

I would surmise that one reason that Smart is so reticent to consider that the experiences of mystics are \textit{a priori} different is his own religious belief system. Smart describes himself in his 1999 interview as a “Buddhist-Episcopalian”, a term which he admits he uses partly to annoy people.\footnote{London, 2000.} He means to emphasize by this, though, that he believes no religion can contain the whole truth; this belief can also carry with it the corollary of some degree of universalism, the idea that to some extent all religions have a share in ultimate Truth.

Universalism in one form or another is not an uncommonly held belief in the Episcopal Church to which Smart belonged (and to which this author belongs). Being steeped in both a
theistic Christian tradition (by birth) and in a monistic Buddhist one (by affinity and study), and reconciling them as he does by affirming each in their similarities and choosing the rest from among those parts of each which are not reconcilable, Smart may find it difficult to accept that the different experiences that mystics in each tradition have are really different in their ontology. If all religions participate in the Truth, then he may have felt that surely that Truth would become manifest in the experiences of those who participate in those manifestations in a way that is the same for all religions.

Katz, on the other hand, has for most of his career, been involved in a deep study of Judaism. The strictly theistic Jewish tradition with its unique mystical practices of merkabah mysticism and qabala does not participate in the sort of universalism I noted above; while modern Judaism is focused much more on the role of Judaism as the tradition solely of the Jewish people and often accepts that the religions of the non-Jewish people are valid for those people, the Jewish tradition from which those mystical paths sprung did not particularly consider the role of the nations who were not Israel. Israel was “the people of G-d” and merkabah and qabalistic practices were that people’s way of directly experiencing that Being.

I think that this sort of background makes Katz much more willing to discriminate between the various types of mystical experience, and willing to take the next step in his essay and claim that even a typology of mystical experiences is not a workable proposition. By his participation within a cultural norm which readily distinguishes between “monistic” and “theistic”, “kosher” and “unclean”, “Jew” and “Gentile”, and so on, Katz is more willing to concede that mystics’ experiences are different in more than just the interpretation put to them.
Bibliography


