

[1968. Review of *Experience and God*, by John E. Smith. *Christianity Today* 8 Nov.]

Empirical Religion

Experience and God, by John E. Smith (Oxford, 1968, 209 pp., \$4.75) is reviewed by Gordon H. Clark, professor of philosophy, Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana.

In the first, the shorter, the basic, and therefore the most important part of this book, the author, John E. Smith, defends the philosophy of empiricism so that in the second and much longer part he can construct an empirical religion and philosophy.

In defense of empiricism Smith fulminates against restricting experience to sensation and in particular against the subjective idealism that result from such restriction. Experience is encounter: it is objective, not subject, a critical product of the intersection between reality and a self-conscious being. Experience does not reside uniquely in the person who has it. Indeed, experience is not mental at all; it has a social character. "The experience of being a self distinct from a world of events and other selves is itself an event, and one that is usually accompanied by a shock."

I myself cannot recall any such shock. I seem always to have realized that I was not the boy who lived next door. Perhaps before this is pronounced unusual, a poll should be taken. I remember being hit by a baseball bat at an early age, as the batter slung it aside and ran for first. The game no doubt was a social situation, but the hurt and bruise were private and individual. So, too, when smallpox may have threatened, the doctor vaccinated me, the individual; he did not vaccinate the social situation.

Then again, even if experience is an encounter with reality, there is no guarantee that this encounter gives more accurate information than the subjective idealist would allow it. My own encounter with allegedly objective roll mops led me to contradict violently the predications some of my friends made.

This highlights the first gap in Smith's formulation. There is no continuity between his poorly defined "experience" and his assertion of a religious reality. To obscure the gap, he momentarily reduced "God" to "religious object," for the latter is so vague that maybe it could be reached from some equally vague "experience." But the gap cannot be hidden, for when he needs some "religion," he has a revert to the terms "God," "holy," and "religious dimension." If these terms were clearly defined, the gap would be painfully obvious; yet vague as they remain, the author shows no derivation from experience.

Instead of justifying them, Smith asserts, reiterates, and begs the question. For example, "To ignore the religious dimension of experience in favor of a wholly dogmatic approach to God through revelation is an error." Is it? Could not dogmatic revelation itself be the religious dimension of experience? "The attempt to present God as a being who breaks into the world and human life entirely *ab extra* through sheer self-disclosure must always fail to convey to the would-be believer a proper understanding of his belief." Would Abraham agree to this? If the author believes that Abraham was deceived or lacked proper understanding, something more is needed beyond the simple statement that this "is an error."

There is a second gap, this time one that the author acknowledges. It is impossible to derive any positive religion from the “religious dimension of experience.” This leaves unsupported, not so much his denial that Christianity is final and exhaustive, as his assertion that Buddhism and Hinduism contain true revelations from God. One would like to see a detailed, step-by-step account of how experience justifies this or that truth in Hinduism. If the alleged truth is definite, even the author admits the gap; but if the truth is vague enough to be found in some form in all three religions, the “God” is the common characteristic of Jehovah, Shiva, and Nirvana; and this is nothing at all. These considerations ruin some twenty pages of non-Chalcedonian Christology, as well as the assumptions underlying a discussion of the Book of Job.

So far as I can see, the best Smith does with this situation is to appeal to a “living reason” that depends on “convincing” conversation, which by the canons of logic is fallacious (chapter 4). Such fallacious “living reason” can “develop the content of experience” in any direction one wishes. Christianity – whether it be liberal or orthodox – Buddhism, and Hinduism follow equally well.