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MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE, RELIGIOUS DOCTRINE
AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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SUMMARY

The spiritual vacuum generated by the decline of the Christian world-view in the West has created for Western man the opportunity of taking up any one of a variety of modes of spirituality. Religious diversity has become a fact in Western religious life. This increasing pluralism has led to a realisation of the philosophical problem inherent in it, a problem crystallised in the so-called 'conflicting truth claims' problem:- The different religions appear to make different and incompatible claims about the nature of ultimate reality, of divinity, of human nature, and cosmic destiny.

This study allows us to pursue this problem by examining the relationship between certain 'universal' forms of religious experience, especially mystical experience, and the doctrines of various religious traditions. Therefore, the study has a two-fold aim. Firstly, it proposes to give a philosophical analysis of what is involved in and assumed by the phenomenological determination of the nature of religious experience. And secondly, in the light of this, it intends to examine the possibility of resolving the problem of conflicting truth claims by appeal to religious experience.

To this end, we examine a number of seminal writers who, having undertaken the task of determining the nature of religious experience, in so doing, both illuminate the

problem of conflicting truth claims and reflect the difficulties inherent in its resolution. In the latter part of the Introduction and in the first four chapters, we examine the accounts of religious experience offered by S. Radhakrishnan, R.C. Zaehner, W.T. Stace, N. Smart and R. Otto. Simultaneously, we analyse their accounts of the relationship between religious belief and religious doctrines.

In the first section of Chapter Five, we undertake a brief comparative analysis of the major features of these accounts and summarise the similarities and differences between them. In the second section, we review the attempts made by these authors to resolve the problem of truth and religions and conclude that the problem of conflicting truth claims has not been fully resolved by any of the theories previously examined.

In the next chapter, we argue that this failure is especially due to a conceptual impasse generated by inadequate notions of the relationship between mystical experience and its interpretation. We examine this impasse by exposition and criticism of four possible models of this relationship.

We examine a further model in the final chapter and suggest some crucial modifications to it. In the light of this, a number of theses are presented which deal with the relationship between mystical experience and religious doctrine. We suggest that our final model, suitably modified, indicates that a much more complex phenomenology of religious experience is needed. This in turn leads to our

other main conclusion. This is to the effect that the attempt to determine religious truth by appeal to religious experience is a conceptually impossible one and that, therefore, the resolution of conflicting truth claims between different religions needs to be conducted mainly on extra-experiential grounds.