

*Benny Shanon

The Divine Within

*Review of Huston Smith's
'Cleansing the Doors of Perception'*

Huston Smith is a student of religion who has been directly involved with the psychedelic movement since its very inception in the late 1950s. *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*¹ brings together various articles that Smith has written over the years — new notes and updates have been added throughout. In these articles Smith presents his reflections on various issues pertaining to psychedelic substances, their use and their import. Also included are two interviews with the author. The views and reflections in this book are thoughtful and insightful, sensitive and balanced. Overall, the texts gathered in this book bring together intellect and poesis so that they both touch one's heart and make one think. I gather the most appropriate epithet to cover these various qualities is 'wise'.

Thematically, the items collected here cover issues pertaining to different academic disciplines — philosophy and the study of religion, sociology and anthropology, ethnobotany, psychiatry and clinical psychology. The book also contains interesting accounts of meetings with some of the most central individuals who brought psychoactive substances to the Western civilization. There are firsthand reports of experiences with these substances throughout. Last but not least, special mention is due to what comes in the very first pages of this book — a wonderful list of citations beginning with Aldous Huxley and ending with Plato. Succinctly and most aptly, this list captures the perspective put forth in this book. This perspective is epitomized by the use of the term by which the plants and substances at hand are denoted. The term is *entheogens* — those bringing forth the Divine within. This term was coined by Ruck *et al.* (1979) and many today prefer it to earlier terms such as psychedelic and psychomimetic (for further discussion,

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[1] **Huston Smith**, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Substances*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 2000 xvii + 173 pp., \$22.95, ISBN: 1585420344

see the Introduction to Smith's book as well as Masters and Houston, 1966, and Ott, 1996). The significance of this term for the author is reflected also in the book's subtitle: 'The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals'. Indeed, the most famous item in this collection is an article published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1964, 'Do Drugs Have Religious Import?' The empirical observations presented throughout this book make it clear that Smith's answer to this question is definitely in the affirmative.

I concur. I am saying this on the basis of my extensive acquaintance with a substance not mentioned in this book — Ayahuasca, a powerful psychoactive brew that the indigenous people of the upper Amazonian region have used for millennia (for pertinent anthropological data see Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975; 1978; Luna, 1986; Luna and Amaringo, 1993; as well as the various contributions in Harner, 1973, and in the special issue of *America Indígena*, 1986). Today, Ayahuasca is still the basic instrument of medicine-men in the entire region (see Dobkin de Rios, 1972). The brew is also used as a sacrament in several syncretic religions founded in the twentieth century in Brazil (see Polari, 1992; MacRae, 1992; the Centro de Memoria e Documentação, 1989, and Sena Araujo, 1999). Like the Native American Church that employs peyote and is the topic of Chapter Nine in Smith's book, these religions bring together the indigenous Amerindian use of entheogens with Christian religious elements. Ayahuasca is especially famous for the powerful visions that it induces. These are often coupled with ideations, both spiritual and intellectual, and profound mystical experiences. Many drinkers say that Ayahuasca makes them encounter the Divine.

Of course, as Smith emphasizes throughout his book, the religious import is not an automatic, mechanistic effect that the psychoactive substances induce. What happens to one under the influence is the product of a complex interaction between three players — the substance, the individual and what he brings with him or her, and the context at hand. (In the literature on altered states of consciousness, the last two factors are commonly referred to as *set* and *setting*, respectively (see Leary *et al.*, 1969; Zinberg, 1984). As Smith (citing Huxley) points out in the Introduction to this book, chemicals do not *cause* visionary experiences, they *occasion* them. Unfortunately, it is very common for individuals — both those who favour the use of mind-altering substances and ones who fight them — to be oblivious to this. Furthermore, as Smith has emphasized throughout his career, the essence of religion are not single episodes of powerful and wondrous experiences but rather a long-term mode of being that affects an individual's entire approach to and conduct of his or her life (see Smith, 1992).

I am, however, neither a student of religion nor a sociologist nor a person involved in societal change; rather I am a cognitive psychologist and a philosopher of psychology. Given my own personal and professional interests, and in light of the general orientation the readership of this journal, I would like to highlight another import of the entheogenic agents — the philosophical. In the chapter entitled 'Something like a summing up' Smith writes:

I believe that . . . the basic message of the entheogens — that there is another Reality that puts this one in the shade — is true. There is no way that the prevailing view of

the human self (which depicts it as an organism in an environment that has evolved purposelessly through naturalistic causes only) can accept that claim, which means that its Procrustean anthropology must go (p. 133).

By his own admittance Smith does not offer any philosophical argument for this claim. Rather, he presents an almost affective evaluation:

I do not see how anyone can deny that the traditional, theomorphic view of the human self which the entheogens endorse is nobler than the one that common sense and modern science (misread) have replaced it with. Whether the theomorphic view is true or not cannot be objectively determined, so all I can ask of the opposition is that it not equate noble views with wishful thinking (p. 133).

As I read it, there are two issues here. The first pertains to ontology — is/are there indeed reality/ies other than this one that we ordinarily perceive and act in? The second question has to do with the evaluation of world views. Whether it can eventually be resolved or not, the first question is a metaphysical one that has to be addressed by the tools of philosophy, science and logic. The second issue involves the evaluation of the human condition and is to be addressed by other means — notably, psychological, existential, theological, poetic as well as pragmatic and ecological. This second issue relates very naturally to the topics of religiosity and spirituality which are the main focus of Smith's book. Incontestably, its import on both the level of the individual and that of culture is paramount. However, to my mind, as far as human cognition is concerned, the truly remarkable — indeed, puzzling — thing about entheogens is their making people believe in the first, ontological dimension.

To my mind, from an intellectual point of view, this is the most intriguing question posed by the psychedelic experience. Faced with the visions induced by the powerful entheogens, the indigenous peoples of America invariably believed that other, independent realities were presented to them. Many of the modern partakers of entheogens endorse this conclusion as well; this is especially true of the members of the syncretic sects employing Ayahuasca. The reader will be reminded that the term 'a separate reality' is the title of one of the books by Castaneda (another main figure in the psychedelic movement who, strangely enough, is not mentioned in this book; see Castaneda, 1971). Indeed, the psychedelic experience includes not only extraordinary perceptual effects but also significant ideational ones. This has been noted long ago by William James (another of the authors cited in the opening pages of Smith's book; see James, 1929) who singled out noesis (that is, the feeling of knowledge) as one of the characteristics of the mystic experience. This characteristic is also incorporated in more elaborate, famous characteristics of Bucke (1901/1991), Stace (1961) and Pahnke (1972). To my mind, however, this question has not yet received a serious philosophical treatment. The philosophical questions involved here are, of course, most difficult. They pertain to ontology and metaphysics, epistemology and the theory of meaning. This is not the place to treat them seriously (a preliminary attempt in this direction is presented in a forthcoming book of mine devoted to the phenomenology of the Ayahuasca experience).

The ontological question is, of course, tied to an epistemological one. If there is another reality, then the noetic feelings that are experienced in the course of non-ordinary states of consciousness are valid. In one chapter of this book Smith quotes an (Asian) Indian philosopher asked to characterize the difference between the metaphysical approach of his culture and that of the West:

Indian philosophy differs from Western in that Western philosophers philosophize from a single state of consciousness, the waking state, whereas India philosophizes from them all (p. 70).

This brings to mind the original conceptual framework suggested by Tart (1972), by which knowledge — including scientific knowledge — is state dependent. Different states of consciousness afford the discovery of different truths, all of which are valid. Ideas along these lines were also put forth by Roberts (1983).

The epistemological and ontological issues are not merely aspects of academic theories about entheogens, they are part and parcel of the entheogenic experience itself. Whatever the philosophical (or religious) import of this experience is, it is a most remarkable fact that under the influence, people often come to entertain metaphysical and philosophical ideas. As pointed out in Shanon (1998), this is true also of individuals without any academic education or philosophical training. My interviews of about 150 informants on their Ayahuasca experience tapped reflections about the structure and meaning of reality, reflections about nature and the phenomenon of life, insights regarding the human predicament and the meaning of human life, ideas concerning mind and consciousness and, last but not least, thoughts having to do with the nature of the Divine and the relationship between God and the universe.

Strikingly, the philosophical ideas people entertain with entheogens reveal a coherent metaphysical picture, one which may be referred to as idealistic monism. Time and again, Ayahuasca drinkers noted that with the brew they came to appreciate that all that exists is interconnected and that consciousness is the basic stuff of which the world is made. The picture depicted is, I find, akin to that encountered in Hindu Upanishads (see, for instance, Phillips, 1995); it is also reminiscent to ideas entertained by in the West by Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza and Hegel (see also Huxley, 1944). Interestingly, William James (who, recall, is cited in the opening pages of Smith's book) when under the effect of another psychoactive substance, the 'laughing' gas nitrous oxide, arrived at a similar idealistic world view. By no means was this a simple matter for James, for the philosophical ideas he conceived under the influence were reminiscent of the ideas of Hegel, a philosopher whose view James, as a philosopher in real life, opposed (see James, 1882).

One possible approach to account for non-ordinary knowledge is to invoke informational resources stored in the unconscious. In his book, Smith distinguishes between several kinds of unconscious proposed in different contexts and calls for the postulation of a new one. The former kinds include the Freudian unconscious (characterized by Smith as 'individual'), the social unconscious attributed to Marx and a physiological unconscious (related to the notion of tacit

knowledge defined in Polanyi, 1962 and 1967). Another kind is Jung's collective unconscious which, curiously, is not on Smith's list. Smith's new kind of unconscious is that of *the sacred unconscious*. What distinguishes this innermost layer of the psyche is that in it, like in a mirror, one finds a reflection of the world outside.

Much can be said on the notion of the unconscious both in the context of altered states of consciousness and in that of human cognition at large. The topic involves fundamental theoretical issues pertaining to the study of mind, and this is not the place for it. Here, let me take the narrative stance and cite a story:

God wanted to hide his secrets in a secure place. 'Would I put them on the moon?', He reflected. 'But then, one day human beings could get there, and it could be that those who would arrive there would not be worthy of the secret knowledge. Or perhaps I should hide them in the depths of the ocean,' God entertained another possibility. But, again, for the same reasons, he dismissed it. Then the solution occurred to Him — 'I shall put my secrets in the inner sanctum of man's own mind. Then only those who really deserve it will be able to get to it.'

I heard this story in the Amazon, told to me by two unrelated individuals in two different places. In both cases the story was linked to the knowledge assumedly imparted by Ayahuasca.

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