



10-1-1999

Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs.*

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Recommended Citation

Malhotra, Ashok (1999) "Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs.*" *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 41 : No. 41 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol41/iss41/9>

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Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

This is an unusual book on religious belief systems. It offers a unique way of dealing with the diversity of religious perspectives presented by Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, African, and other indigenous belief systems as well as worldviews of Marxism and Nationalism.

Smart undertakes a monumental task to make sense of the complexity of these perspectives. Since his aim is to present to the reader in a clear fashion the theory and practice of religion, he does not delve into the content of definition but rather into the common dimensions displayed by various religions. Smart uses the method of phenomenology or 'informed empathy', through which he describes "the experiences and intentions of religious participants," or "what religious acts mean to the actors." He offers a non-judgmental description of the way religion is believed and practiced by the adherents.

Smart's twenty five years of study and reflection on religious phenomenon reveals to him eight essential dimensions or recurring features of religions, which are:

1. Doctrine/Philosophy
2. Ritual
3. Mythic/Narrative
4. Experiential/Emotional
5. Ethical/Legal
6. Social
7. Material
8. Political

In this all-encompassing book, Smart presents an analysis of the entire pattern of human spiritual life, through "the grammar of symbols, and the modes and forms in which religion manifests itself."

Smart believes that all religious and secular belief systems evolve doctrines and philosophy for various reasons. These differing doctrines or philosophies are integrated with other aspects

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1999

of religion because they offer explanation and justification for the seven dimensions.

Moreover all religions display their practical aspect through ritual. Ritual consists of such activities as worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites, rites of passage, and healing. In most of the religions, ritual forms the core feature because of its intimate connection to all the other dimensions.

Furthermore, all religions have their mythic or narrative dimension. Myths are stories about the invisible, divine or sacred world that are beyond being straight history. Myths tell the stories of the founders or most significant personalities of these religions. For example, there are stories about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus or tales about the life, loves, or mystical powers of Krishna or stories about the Buddha's life, temptations, and enlightenment. A number of religious stories also touch upon such dimensions as the ethical, social, economic, and political.

There is also the experiential or emotional dimension of each religion. Certain experiences may be extremely significant in the history or establishment of a religion such as the enlightenment of the Buddha and his firm stand against the temptations of Mara; the prophetic visions of Mohammed; the mystical experience offered to Arjuna by God Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita; or the conversion of Saint Paul. And of course, each religion assigns a different kind of meaning to these experiences. There are also concomitant feelings and emotions related to significant religious experiences as well as rituals. For Smart "so much of religious practice is soaked in emotions. Without them, the practice would be insincere, mechanical, merely external, not really worth undertaking."

Along with philosophy, myth, ritual, and emotional aspects, a religious tradition offers ethical and legal imperatives, which might form the core of the religious practice. For example "The Torah as a set of injunctions is central to orthodox Judaism; the Shari'a is integral to Islam; Buddhism affirms the four great virtues (brahmaviharas); Confucianism lays down the desired attitudes of the gentleman; and so. In modern national states certain norms of civil behavior tend to be prescribed in schools."

Smart points out that there is also a social dimension, which

forms the organizational component of the religion. In his words: "Any tradition will manifest itself in society, either as a separate organization with priests or other religious specialists (gurus, lawyers, pastors, rabbis, imams, shamans and so on)," and "These experts, functionaries, charismatic figures and holy persons exhibit in their differing ways many of the modes of religious expressions."

Another important feature shared by all of these belief systems is the material dimension, which is expressed through the "Christian chapels and cathedrals, Muslim mosques, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Jewish temples; religious icons, paintings, statues, scriptures, books, and pulpits."

In the final dimension, Smart includes the political aspect of religion. He regards this current study to be relatively old-fashioned because it presents the phenomenon of religion through traditional categories and old symbols. He alerts the reader to the fact that the study of religion will not meet the prophets or founders of these ancient religions; however, they are bound to encounter the disciples in their current religious setting. The reader has to deal with modern faith in terms of contemporary global religion and worldview. In our setting, new symbols have emerged, which could aid us in viewing religion in a comparative way or a phenomenological way. This unique approach consists of 'informed empathy' and is conducive to the understanding of the other.

Smart believes that though the idea of mutual understanding is in its germinal stage, it is surely sticking its neck out. He cites a number of reasons for this development. First, we can and do understand one another across cultures; second, understanding is an antidote to nationalism and racism; third, the notion of incommensurability of culture is shown to be false. People are coming to the realization that there are common themes and concepts in various cultures. People of different cultures and backgrounds can enter into a positive dialog. This kind of dialog and mutual understanding will help people think globally in an interrelated way. Smart's hope is that "we may as a globe get more used to good and sensible discussions about resemblances and difference, and we may get used to a tolerant style of debate." He further asserts that "the spirit of debate and thinking is in the long

run inevitable . . . and the idea of the phenomenological also will spread and deepen. This is where it is reasonable to be optimistic. Persistent irrationality and the espousals of mutual unintelligibility are bound to wither, and many will look back on modern thinking with contempt and amazement."

Smart's book is an outstanding piece of research on the world's religious belief systems. It indicates a direction toward bringing harmony among various religions by paving a way for the creation of a universal religion. Both scholars and students of religion will find something enlightening in this monumental work. This excellent book will be very useful in courses on comparative religion or the world's belief systems.

Ashok Malhotra

Tanya M. Luhrmann. *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

The Good Parsi is a curious book of modest dimension. The text contains seven brief chapters totaling two hundred pages, not counting a Preface, Prologue, the Notes, Bibliography, Acknowledgments and an Index. The author, Tanya M. Luhrmann, professionally an anthropologist, utilized materials ranging from literature and historical documents to religious materials and anecdotal observations derived from anthropological fieldwork. The Preface identifies the author's several visits to Bombay and western India from 1988 to 1994, during which she engaged in fieldwork that accounts for a major portion of the text's contents. In the Prologue, Dr. Luhrmann summarizes her purpose as a contribution "to the theorizing of the colonized subjects by describing a process in which members of a particular group chose a course to advance a morally desirable end, and yet, through the slow weave of circumstances, they became caught within the sticky web of their own symbolism and have come to accuse themselves of moral weakness.... Under colonial rule, the