

Applying Nanian Smart's Framework for Study of World Great Religions; a Review

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Abstract: The current study reviews fundamentals of Nanian Smart's proposed seven dimension of religion. Then reviews the five big religions in the world and compare the Smart's dimensions in these religions and provide samples. Many of religion researchers believe the Smart's model provide a good theoretical framework for conceptualizing main issues, symbols and necessities of the religions. So, the current study applies this approach for better understanding of world biggest religions.

[Mahnaz Dehghanifard. **Applying Nanian Smart's Framework for Study of World Great Religions; a Review.** Journal of American Science 2012;8(3):474-477]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>. 63

Keywords: Nanian Smart, Comparison, Religion, 7 dimensions.

Introduction:

It is impossible to answer the question 'What is religion?' without resorting to personal opinion. Like 'What is good?', the question is one of values which are perhaps not open to scientific enquiry at all. This is quite an intractable problem. Although most of us have an idea of what religion is, we might struggle to explain it. When asked, many would say that religion is a way of life based on belief in God. However, do we mean the god of classical theism, the god of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or something more general, more nebulous? And what of those traditions, such as certain branches of Buddhism, that effectively sidestep the god question altogether? All this goes to show how our pre-existing values and perceptions colour our attempts to answer the question of 'What is religion?'

Many scholars, from various disciplines, have attempted to answer the question in as objective a manner as possible. What follows is an introduction to some of those answers. We begin by taking a detailed look at the work of the religious scholar Ninian Smart before going on to explore the views of psychologists, sociologists and evolutionary biologists.

Approaches for Analyzing Religions Social Approach

Sociologists explain religion in terms of its role within society. Karl Marx's analysis led him to conclude that religion was a powerful agent of social control. He believed that the position of ruling elites both stemmed from and was maintained by religious beliefs; the divine right of kings being a prime example. Marx believed that religion would naturally fade away in a socialist society. It is interesting to note that in both Soviet Russia and China religion did not disappear.

Emile Durkheim took a functionalist approach to the subject of religion and concluded that it was an all important factor in creating and sustaining a harmonious society. Durkheim saw religion as the cement that bound society together. Through shared beliefs and practices religion creates a sense of social identity and reinforces the moral values of the society. Rites of passage are important as a means of initiating individuals into the wider society and embedding a sense of responsibility. Like Marx, Durkheim recognised that religion played a role in social control but he saw this in a positive light, arguing that religion helped to maintain the community's shared values.

Max Weber adopted a social action approach to the study of religion and explored how religion could be an agent of change rather than a conservative agent inhibiting change. Weber examined the relationship between Calvinism, a form of Protestant Christianity, and the development of capitalism. Weber concluded that, although Calvinism was not the only contributing factor, it created a context in which one's position in society was not fixed and in which hard work was actively encouraged. The result, according to Weber, was significant social change.

Feminist sociologists have identified religion as a key factor in the subordination of women. They state that practically all religions stem from and maintain patriarchal societies. The use of masculine language to describe and address the god(s) has helped to reinforce the dominance of men. In the same way the exclusion of women from the leadership of many traditions has compounded women's sense of inferiority. Religion has often denigrated women; at best they are seen as morally weak and at worst they are believed to be inherently evil. Women's ambitions have been constrained by the assertion that it is their religious duty to obey

their husbands and to serve them, and their children, in the home. Feminist sociologists have also highlighted the role of religion in the subjugation of female sexuality. Women have been denied a positive view of their own bodies and sexuality and instead have been presented with virginal role models.

Evolutionary Approach

Many scientists, from a wide variety of disciplines, influenced by Darwinian evolution have sought to explain religion in evolutionary terms.

Some writers have tried to suggest that the pervasiveness of religious beliefs is due to the existence of a 'god gene'. Supporters of the theory, such as Dean Hamer (*The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*), suggest that human religious behaviour is the result of a genetic adaptation. Twin research conducted at the University of Minnesota in the late 1970s and early 1980s seemed to suggest that some people have a genetic predisposition towards spirituality. Religious supporters of the idea argue that, as creatures we are 'hardwired' to reach out to our creator; God made us to want to love him.

Richard Dawkins, the world-famous author, ethologist and evolutionary biologist, has put forward the concept of the 'meme'. Memes mutate and evolve in much the same way as genes, but unlike genes that are bundles of genetic material within the cells of living organisms, memes are bundles of ideas, such as tunes, or jokes, scientific theories or religious beliefs. While genes are passed on through sexual reproduction, memes are passed on in communication, and ultimately, through imitation. Religious beliefs, according to Dawkins, are among some of the most powerful memes ever and, although he rightly offers no explanation of the origins of the god meme, his concept provides a theoretical framework that explains the development and amazing persistence of religious beliefs: religion is highly infectious.

Dimensions of religion

Smart (1958, 1960) is widely known for his seven-part definition of religion, or rather scheme of study; as this approach avoids the problem of defining altogether. Whatever else religion may or may not be – whether theistic or non-theistic, religions possess certain recognizable elements, which can be studied. These dimensions vary in importance but are almost always present. Smart divided these into "historical" and "para-historical," meaning by the latter those dimensions that take the investigation into the experience, or inner lives, or religious people. The "historical" can be studied empirically, the para-historical takes the student into

the realm of belief and concepts and requires dialogue and participation; "since the study of man is in an important sense participatory – for one has to enter into men's intentions, beliefs, myths, desires, in order to understand why they act as they do – it is fatal if cultures including our own are described merely externally, without entering into dialogue with them. Below we have some discussions on the dimensions of Smart's categorization.

Social and Institutional: belief system is shared and attitudes practiced by a group. Often rules for identifying community membership and participation (public)

Ethical and legal: Rules about human behavior (often regarded as revealed from supernatural realm)

Doctrinal and philosophical: systematic formulation of religious teachings in an intellectually coherent form

Material: ordinary objects or places that symbolize or manifest the sacred or supernatural

Ritual: Forms and orders of ceremonies (private and/or public) (often regarded as revealed)

Narrative and Mythic: stories (often regarded as revealed) that work on several levels. Sometimes narratives fit together into a fairly complete and systematic interpretation of the universe and human's place in it.

Experiential and emotional: dread, guilt, awe, mystery, devotion, liberation, ecstasy, inner peace, bliss (private)

Seven Dimensions of religion and samples an comparison with world big religions

Ritual Dimension:

Rites of Passage – mark or bring about change of social position and status, change in physical or spiritual being of initiate; change of life phase (life-cycle rites: birth, puberty, marriage, death). Example: Death rite in Hinduism: pyre, son recites prayer to fire, burns, and strikes head

The Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension

The Intellectual components of religions, however simple or complex.. Especially developed in literate, scholarly traditions. The role and influence of scripture upon the spread and continuity of idea. Examples of doctrine are: Theology: Systematic speculation about God and God's relationship with Human beings.

The Ethical and Legal Dimension

Ethics concerns what is good and bad, how one should live. E.g., the ethic of love in Christianity; Covenantal ethic in Judaism. Law concerns what you must do and what will happen if you don't (rules and punishments). Examples: Shari'a (Law): pray (5) times daily, give alms, four wives.... Torah ("law"):

hundreds of laws, dietary (milk and meat). **The Social and Institutional Dimension:** how people's interactions are organized as part of their religion.

Examples include: Church, monastic orders, Sangha, Umma. All of society itself: totemism and tribes. Institutional and individual influences in religions

The Material Dimension: physical forms in which a religion is embodied. Examples can be divided into the following categories: Structures: churches, temples, synagogues. Architecture, theology, religious practice is interconnected. Cathedral: nave and transept = A cross, merging heaven and earth, divine light. Doctrine and theological debate embodied in architecture: simplicity of Cistercian, Calvinist churches (transcendent God). How people build their homes and communities can reflect their religious worldview: Navajo village: map of the cosmos. Shrines, dwellings are organized according to four cardinal directions, points where spirit connects to the world of the living'

The Experiential and Emotional Dimension: subjective, emotional side of religion. What goes on Basis of religious vitality and human significance, central to ongoing individual religiosity, to the founding of a tradition itself Muhammad, conversion of Paul, Buddha's enlightenment; devotional movements; mystical traditions (direct experience of the divine or ultimate). The very core of religion is experience and emotion – all else revolves around experience. William James (*Varieties of Religious Experience*): James' definition of religion = "...[based in] the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." Is there a unique and essential form of religious experience? Religion as *sui generis*. Gerardus Van der Leeuw, Rudolph Otto, William James. Rudolph Otto (1869-1937): distinctive human experience of the *numinous* (from *numina*: sacred forces, spirits). *Mysterium tremendum et facinans*: mystery that awes and fascinates. Examples: Bhagavad Gita; Job.

The Narrative Dimension

What we learn from stories is different from what we learn from systematic thought and concepts. Narratives convey their own types of meaning and information. Cannot reduce the essence of a story to a group of statements. This dimension includes the following terms and examples. Narratives are an important part of all religions of the world. Narratives are retained, shared, and changed in different ways:

Oral/written. Kinds of narratives are: *Historical narratives*: Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad -- Histories of: a people; saints; prophets; nations and lands; wars *Creation narratives*: before history, before time. How the universe began - cosmogony. How is creation organized -- cosmology. *Destruction narratives*: eschatological (death and final destiny). Nataraja: Lord of the Dance, circle of fire. Revelations: describes the signs and events of final days when Christ comes to reclaim the faithful. Final days = eschaton. Flood myths. Creation and destruction narratives tell us about a tradition's notion of time: i.e., cyclical, linear. *Divine narratives*: stories about the gods. Narrative and ritual are closely connected - myth and ritual. Ritual often re-enacts myth: rite of passage and primordial sacrifice.

The Practical and Ritual Dimension: what the adherents of a religion do as part of that religion. Examples include: Prayer: private and solitary moments of quiet reflection on God; noisy, group singing and chanting; fully prostrate, while prayer is conducted by a priest; kneeling down, reciting memorized prayers bowing down repeatedly in direction of Mecca, chanting from the Holy Qur'an. Asceticism: severe self-discipline, renouncing pleasure; desert fathers and martyrdom, yoga and world-renunciation (thorns); Self-mortification: flagellation, hair shirts - still the senses; snake handling and drinking poisons in the Appalachians. Possession: hook hanging, fire walking, possession by demons, gods; speaking in tongues glossalalia): Pentecostal, divine language. Modes of dress: Muslim women and the purdah; Muslim man who dies his beard red after pilgrimage to Mecca; novitiate in a monastic order shaves head (tonsure). Pilgrimage: to Mecca to circle round the shrine (Ka'bah), kiss the stone; holy temples in the Himalayas.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study applies Smart's approach for better understanding of world biggest religions. Religion, should not be discussed in polite company because of the controversy it provokes. Religion addresses the most fundamental questions about what it is to be human. Religion, whether we are believers or not, goes to the very heart of who we believe we are. It is no surprise therefore, that when we encounter views that challenge our self-perception it evokes a strong emotional response within us. Because of this inherent power, religion has brought out both the very best and the very worst in human nature. Great acts of love, service and self-sacrifice have been credited to religious belief. It has been the driving force behind some of the world's most

wonderful works of art, music and architecture but, ironically, it has also been the source of much that is evil. In order to truly understand mankind and the history of human thought one must take note of the role played by religion. To disregard religion as unimportant would be to misunderstand the power of its influence over human affairs. Whatever the status of religion in the modern world, it shows little sign of going away.

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2/12/12