

The Seven Dimensions of Religion

According to British Scholar of Religion, Ninian SMART

OVERVIEW: (Rewording and Re-Ordering by Julius-Kei Kato)

1. Mythical Dimension: stories and symbols that touch one's deepest core
2. Creeeds (Doctrinal Dimension): a body of principles or "truths" one believes in
3. Ethical Dimension: ethical or moral principles one is committed to honour, practice, and live
4. Experiential Dimension: "Spiritual" experiences that one treasures because they have significantly changed one's life and perspective. These could be "staged" or "serendipitous" ("randomly happened")
5. Practice / Praxis (Ritual - Dimension): some "practices" (or ritual) that one is committed to do in order to further one's "spirituality"
6. Social Dimension: This refers to the group of people / communities one will associate in order to foster and support one's spirituality
7. Material / Artistic Dimension: This refers to material symbols one will produce or treasure as an expression of one's own spirituality

Smart set out the dimensions of religion first in the *The Religious Experience of Mankind* published in 1969.

Originally Smart set out six dimensions of religion but added a seventh - the material dimension - later. All quotations in this section are taken from it.

The dimensions are intended to present the reader with a way of gathering and classifying information about religious practices. He described this as a 'scientific undertaking' which aims to deal objectively with facts. He clearly states it was not his intention to investigate the truth claims made by religious believers. This approach is sometimes terms 'methodological agnosticism'. In *The Phenomenon of Religion* Smart said that 'the question of truth is a question not asked, not a question left unanswered'.

The dimensions of religion according to Smart are as follows:

[1] Ritual:

The ritual dimension of religion refers to the ceremonies and outward behaviours which are attached to a specific intention relating to the spiritual realm. All rituals have an 'inner' and an 'outer' element to them. The ritual elements of religion may be simple or complex. There are also secular rituals that people engage in.

Examples: baptism ceremony, closing eyes to pray.

[2] Mythological/narrative:

'The collection of myths, images and stories through which the invisible world is symbolised'. To call them 'myths' does not mean they are untrue (no truth-judgement is made).

Applies to stories which refer to theologically significant supposedly historical events (e.g. Exodus, life of Jesus) as well as overtly religious stories about God.

[3] Doctrinal:

'Doctrines are an attempt to give system, clarity and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolic language of religious faith and ritual'.

Doctrines are the official teachings and systems of a religion.

[4] Ethical:

Moral principles, codes of behaviour, specific commands.

The ideal of ethical behaviour taught by a religion may not be lived up to by individual believers!

Religion generally relates to society and influences it. The ethical codes taught by a religion are often translated into laws and prevailing attitudes in society.

[5] Social:

Religions have a communal social aspect, they are not just about individual beliefs or values.

Society (by which Smart means the specific conditions in which a religion develops and exists) influences religion. Smart uses the example of the way ethical principles may be adapted in order to deal with specific situations. 'The Christian's dedication to brotherly love or one's attitude to war may be determined more by patriotism and a national crisis than by the Gospel.'

[6] Experiential:

The origins of a religion often include very powerful experiential elements. 'The Buddha achieved Enlightenment as he sat in meditation beneath the Bo-Tree. As a consequence of his shattering mystical experience, he believed that he had the secret of the cure for the suffering and dissatisfactions of life in this world. We have records of the inaugural visions of some prophets...The words of Jesus Christ reveal his sense of intimate closeness to the Father; there is little doubt that this rested on highly significant personal experiences.'

Religions also have a powerful experiential element in the lives of believers. Christians believe that God answers prayers, Buddhist seek out deep meaningful experiences through meditation.

Belief is not just about facts talked about. It is a way of life lived.

'For this reason, it is unrealistic to treat Marxism as a religion: though it possesses doctrines, symbols, a moral code, and even sometimes rituals, it denies the possibility of an experience of the invisible world. Neither relationship to a personal God nor the hope of an experience of salvation or nirvana can be significant for the Marxist. Likewise Humanism, because it fixes its sights on this-worldly aims, is essentially nonreligious.'

One problem with the experiential dimension is that experiences tend to be explained and understood in the light of the accepted doctrines of the time. This means that it is difficult to understand what is actually involved in a religious experience.

[7] Material:

Smart added the material dimension of religion later.

The material dimension of religion refers to the artifacts, aids to worship and places.

Sources:

Smart, Ninian. *The religious experience of Mankind*. London: Fontana, 1971.

Smart. Accessed March 15, 2024. <http://www.philosopherkings.co.uk/Smart.html>.
