Smart's seven-dimensional model of religion and six main world religions

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Abstract: This paper examines Smart's seven-dimensional model of religion (experiential, Doctrinal, Ritual, Ethical, Institutional, Visual, Artistic) against six main world religions. Then examine how other belief systems fit into the same model. I shall consider other models briefly attempting an analysis of whether Smart's model is successful. Conclusions over the discussions are presented.

Introduction:

The first consideration when attempting the definition of religion is that a straightforward definition such as Fielding attempts in his classical work excludes the worldview of religion. He speaks of Christianity excluding some traditions we will examine. Each religious tradition within itself embodies numerous belief systems. Many philosophers and theologians would insist that religion is not definable.

Smart recognizes that religion:

'Is partly a matter of convention as to what is counted under the head of religion and what is not.'

(Ninian Smart: *The Phenomenon of Religion* p10).

In setting out his model Smart attempts to find one that is inclusivity of global religion whilst confining the definition to that which can be classified as 'of religion'.

The seven dimensions are: Experiential; Doctrinal; Mythical; Ritualistic; Institutional and Ethical. I now propose to examine these key areas explaining briefly what Smart meant by them attempting to apply it to the six world traditions.

Experiential

Smart explains the experiential dimension as the emotions witnessed by the founder of the tradition

and its followers. Rudolf Otto describes it as the 'numinous experience', that is, the feeling one experience when the senses of man are aroused as a result of paranormal or special places.

Examples of this are Moses and the Burning Bush; Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita.

The second aspect of the experiential is that of mysticism. This is an inner seeking of that which is unknowable. Examples of this would be the whirling dervishes and the Hasidic tradition within Judaism.

Doctrinal

Smart explains this as the formulation of a system to encapsulate the tradition. For instance, Smart gives Aquina's philosophical explanation of creation an authoritative feel compared with the story of creation in Genesis. There is also the doctrine of the Trinity going some way to explain Jesus as God within Christianity. Within Buddhism, the Buddha explained himself the path to salvation whereas other traditions have left that to the succeeding institution to develop.

Mythological

Smart explains this as sacred history or sacred story rather than the term we are familiar with today. The great religions have stories to tell of their founders such as the Enlightenment of the Buddha or the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. There are also stories to explain difficult concepts for example evil. Many faiths strengthen these stories by writing them down as in the Torah or the Qur'an. Oral traditions also evolve such as the Catholic tradition of relying on various saints for help.

Ritual

Smart explained this as a method by which religion expresses itself. Humankind uses rituals worldwide as a form of communication, for example, the handshake. There is a binding together of people who recognize these rituals. Examples of these will be: the ancient Jewish tradition of ritual sacrifice in the Temple; Baptism within Christianity.

Ethical

Religions usually follow a code of ethics they expect their followers to adopt. This concerns not only the individuals' behavior but also that of the society. Examples of this are: the ten commandments; the 613

commandments of Jewish Law; Vatican Edicts on birth control.

Institutional

Smart describes this as the tangible visual embodiment of religion that can be seen on two levels - through groups of people as in the Church, or the Sangha. The second level is through the buildings such as the mosque, the mandir, the cathedral. Also within this category can be places of religious significance such as Benares, the River Ganges and Jerusalem.

Visual/Artistic

These aspects of religion can be translated into works of art; architecture; music. This aids ritual or understanding sacred story for example hymns rosary beads.

Conclusion

In Smart's book *Religious Experience and Mankind* he argues that this model works as closely as possible to discovering the nature of religion. He struggles however in that other world philosophies such as Humanism and Communism closely follow the model.

For the purpose of brevity, I shall outline the model against communism to illustrate the comparisons.

In the ritual dimension, communism had set in place ceremonies performed in praise of the philosophy for example there were annual celebrations of the revolution. In the experiential dimension Karl Marx was held as the 'prophet' and founder of wisdom. His revelation of a new system created the 'wow' factor. In the mythological dimension oral traditions were developed of the revolution. Das Capital became the sacred text. In the doctrinal dimension, edicts were passed down explaining how people were now meant to work and live.

In the ethical dimension moral behavior and the laws of society were adjusted to make credible the communist tradition. For instance, it was acceptable to murder if the 'criminal' was apolitical agitator and the authorities executed. In the institutional dimension the communist party became the 'church' and the mission was communism. In the material dimension places such as Lenin's tomb became a shrine, a focal point of worship. Yet, communism could never be considered a religion but more an ideology. Yet it fits within the model quite comfortably.

The social dimension is questionable. It also relates to politics and racism as 'an identity, a label, a badge of allegiance of a group'. This is how Richard Gombrich terms modern world religion. For him, the key to defining religion is 'what you do, not what you think.'

Hans Kung demonstrates that religion can be classified in terms of family. Indian religions tend to follow mystical route with a mystical leader; Chinese religion with a wise sage; and Near Eastern religion with a wise figure.

It is not possible to put a narrow definition on the religion but I can accept that they belong together in facilitating humankind with its humanity.

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