Ninian Smart's

Seven Dimensions or Religions

Seven Dimensions of Religions

1. The Practical and Ritual Dimension: what the adherents of a religion do as part of that religion

   a. 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

   b. 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

   c. Possession: hook hanging, fire walking, possession by demons, gods; speaking in tongues glossalalia): Pentecostal, divine language

   d. 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)

   e. Pilgrimage: to Mecca to circle round the shrine (Ka'bah), kiss the stone; holy temples in the Himalayas

   f. Ritual: prescribed patterned action in a religious tradition.

      i. Sacrifice: ritual death in which a sacrificial victim is offered to god as part of a reciprocal relationship between god and human beings. Aboriginal: life force of victim released. Aztec human sacrifice; Hindu - buffalo sacrifice; Hebrew bible - Abraham and Isaac. Christian: Death of Christ, sacrificial lamb, commemoration in communion

      ii. Initiation into religious community (often synonymous with adulthood): Sacred thread: presented to guru receive instruction; circumcision in Aboriginal tribes: ritual killing, resurrection of the victim into a new existence; Bar
mitzvah: 13 yr boy reads from Torah and becomes a member of the congregation; confirmation for some Christians; baptism for some Christians

2. The Experiential and Emotional Dimension: subjective, emotional side of religion. What goes on inside the person.

   a. Basis of religious vitality and human significance, central to ongoing individual religiosity, to the founding of a tradition itself

      i. Muhammad, conversion of Paul, Buddha’s enlightenment; filled with the Spirit (Pentecostalism) devotional movements; mystical traditions (direct experience of the divine or ultimate)

      ii. The very core of religion is experience and emotion – all else revolves around experience

3. The Narrative Dimension

   a. 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

   b. Narratives are an important part of all religions of the world.

   c. Narratives are retained, shared, and changed in different ways: Oral/written

   d. Kinds of narrative

      i. Historical narratives: Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad -- Histories of: a people; saints; prophets; nations and lands; wars ....

      ii. Creation narratives: before history, before time: how the universe began – cosmogony; how it creation organized - cosmology

      iii. 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.
4. The Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension
   a. The Intellectual components of religions, however simple or complex.
   b. Especially developed in literate, scholarly traditions
   c. The role and influence of scripture upon the spread and continuity of ideas
   d. Examples of doctrine: trinity; resurrection; submission in Islam; Bodhissatva
   e. Theology: Systematic speculation about God and God's relationship with Human beings.

5. The Ethical and Legal Dimension
   a. Ethics concerns what is good and bad, how one should
      i. E.g., the ethic of love in Christianity; Covenantal ethic in Judaism
   b. Law concerns what you must do and what will happen if you don't (rules and punishments)
      i. Examples: Shari’a (Law): pray (5) times daily, give alms, four wives…. Torah (“law”): hundreds of laws, dietary (milk and meat); Ten Commandments

6. The Social and Institutional Dimension: how people's interactions are organized as part of their religion
   a. Church, monastic orders, Sangha, Umma, Synagogue,
   b. All of society itself: totemism and tribes
   c. Institutional and individual influences in religions

7. The Material Dimension: physical forms in which a religion is embodied
a. Structures: churches, temples, synagogues.

b. Architecture, theology, religious practice are interconnected.
   i. Cathedral: nave and transept = A cross, merging heaven and earth, divine light.
   ii. Doctrine and theological debate embodied in architecture: simplicity of Cistercian, Calvinist churches (transcendent God).
   iii. 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.

c. Representations of divine beings
   i. Orthodox and Protestant Christianity: Icon: devotional painting, carving, or statue of holy figure. Debate over idolatry: worship of idols as divine. Rock, wall, relics: hair, bones, finger nails.
   ii. No representation of Allah in Islam. Representations tell us a great deal about a religion, more you know, the more you see: Tangkhas, Hindu and Buddhist.

d. Ritual objects and substances: the physical objects used in religious ritual:
   i. Cross; Masks (South American); Scripture itself (Torah); Food.

e. Natural Features: sacred landmarks such as mountains, rivers, trees.... : Ganges River = a Hindu goddess, pure and purifying: River Jordan: Baptism. Mount Sinai. Fujiyama

f. Sacred Cities: Banaras (death), Jerusalem, Mecca (birth place of Mh) Pilgrimage Sites.