

The Abrahamic Religions:

An Introduction to World Religions

**Making Sense of Religion: Seven
Dimensions – the Phenomenological
Approach**

Session Week 2

Abba Hailegebriel Girma

***The Ethiopian Orthodox Theological
College Houston, Texas, USA***

Aim and Learning Outcomes – Week 2 Session

Aims

- This session aims to provide students with knowledge and insight in the area of the seven Dimensions of Religion.

Learning Outcomes

- Students have some understanding of:
 - Phenomenological approach to religion.

Seven Dimensions of Religion - the Phenomenological Approach

- Ninian Smart, one of the world's foremost authorities on the study of religion, came up with a framework which provides a helpful means of understanding the nature and the character of all the belief systems commonly deemed religious. The framework, which over time came to be known as the phenomenological approach to religion, comprises of seven dimensions, or phenomena, which, Smart believes, exist in all religions. Seven dimensions:
 1. The Practical or Ritual Dimension
 2. The Mythical or Narrative Dimension
 3. The Doctrinal or Philosophical Dimension
 4. The Ethical or Legal Dimensions
 5. Social or Institutional Dimension
 6. The Experiential or Emotional Dimension
 7. The Material Dimension

1 - The Practical or Ritual Dimension

- Houses of worship are generally used for ritual or ceremonial purposes, and religion tends in part to express itself through such activities- through worship, prayers, offerings and the like. This is an aspect of the practical or ritual dimension of religion. Rituals can be thought of as repeated forms of behaviour according to a pattern which are not done to physically act on anything, but because of their symbolic meaning or their effect on unseen powers.
- Rituals are religious when done from religious motivation and generally relate in some shape or form to religious concepts. Typical forms of religious ritual include worship, festivals, rites of passage, sacrifice, and rules about what can and cannot be eaten. Smart regards activities such as meditation as part of the practical and ritual dimension because they are designed to carry participants to higher states of consciousness, through which the adept has experience of release from worldly existence, of nirvana, of ultimate reality.

2 - The Mythical or Narrative Dimension

- All religions have a collection of myths, images and stories which help members of faith make sense of life. The myths, images and stories enlighten the ritual and contribute to the doctrines associated with the faith. Sometimes, the myths and stories relate to what many believe are important historical events, as in the case of Jewish delivery from slavery in Egypt, an event celebrated every year during Pesach, or Passover. The myths, images and stories are usually to be found in religious scripture.
- Some religious traditions, especially primal ones, have little explicit doctrine, but express their ideas primarily through myth and symbol. Religious myths typically relate to the creation of the world or the action of God or gods in legitimating human institutions such as marriage. When the word myth is applied to stories of religious nature, it is not being implied that they are false. Originally, the word myth simply meant story. Smart insists that the use of this term in relation to religious phenomena is quite neutral as to the truth or falsity of the story. Religious myths can be thought of as truth-bearing stories which enshrine what it is that believers believe.

3 - The Doctrinal or Philosophical Dimension

- To quote from Smart, 'Doctrines are an attempt to give system, clarity and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolic language faith and ritual'. **Wiebe, Donald (1981) Religion and Truth: Towards an Alternative Paradigm for the Study of Religion, The Hague: Mouton, p.135**
- All religions have doctrines, but the doctrines of some religions are far more elaborate and complete than others. Smart suggests that the word religions owe some of their living power to their success in presenting a total picture of reality through a coherent system of doctrines. Once again, doctrines are often enshrined in scripture, but may exist in summarised form as in the creeds associated with different Christian denominations.
- Generally speaking, doctrines fall into one of two groups. First, there are doctrines associated with the transcendent or the ultimate or the sacred. Beliefs about God or gods fall within this group. Second, there are doctrines associated with the human predicament and humankind's quest for salvation or liberation. Beliefs about what happens after we die fall within this group.

4 - The Ethical or Legal Dimensions

- Religions usually incorporate a code of ethics. Ethics concern the behavior of the individual and, to a large extent, the code of ethics of the dominant religion controls the community of behaviors and influences the wider society. Generally speaking, the way that believers conduct their lives determines what happens to them after they die, so the importance of the ethical code should not be underestimated. Needless to say, believers often fall short of ethical teaching may alter as new circumstances arise. Once again, ethical codes are often enshrined in scripture. Then Ten Commandments are well-known ethical codes.
- Girard also emphasizes on the Ten Commandments. He describes that the second half of the Ten Commandments is ‘entirely devoted to prohibiting violence against one’s neighbor.’ And he added, ‘Commandments six, seven, eight, and nine are both simple and brief. They prohibit the most serious acts of violence in the order of their seriousness:
 - You shall not kill.
 - You shall not commit adultery.
 - You shall not steal.
 - You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. **Girard (2001 [1999]) p.7**

4 - The Ethical or Legal Dimensions (Continued)

- The tenth and last commandment is distinguished from those preceding it both by its length and its object: in place of prohibiting an act it forbids a desire.' (Exodus 20:17) The commandments are still relevant today. The world desperately needs to see the Name and Nature of God displayed in the lives of Christians who still take His Word seriously.
- The Ten Commandments state what is required in order to honour and love God and love one's neighbour. Christ not only honoured and kept the Ten Commandments, but He also deepened and elevated them into fulfilment (Matthew 5:17-19).
- Through Christianity, the Commandments were given a new meaning which coincided with the new standards understood by the believers in the New Testament. So the Commandments remain the same but their concept widens as God grants with His grace an opportunity for meditation.

5 - Social or Institutional Dimension

- Religions are not just systems of belief: they also have a communal and social significance. They have a communal and social significance through their institutions and teachings which affect the community in which they exist. It is through the social and institutional dimensions that concrete expression is given to doctrine, myth and ethics.
- Moreover, it is through this dimension that the individual believer acquires a sense of belonging to a religious community, a sense of belonging which helps mould and sustain his or her religious identity.
- An insight into the institutional structures of different faiths helps us to appreciate how faiths meet various communal and social needs, and also reveals where power and authority lies.

6 - The Experiential or Emotional Dimension

- At the personal level, individual believers hope that they will somehow experience directly the invisible world which earlier on we called the transcendent or the ultimate or the sacred.
- Rituals, ceremony and activities such as meditation may create the conditions required to experience faith, devotion or joy, all of which can be thought of as aspects of this dimension. A believer may, perhaps following a time of tension and struggle, be overcome by the feeling that he or she has had an encounter with an awe-inspiring holy being or force. A believer may engage in a spiritual discipline, perhaps under the guidance of a religious teacher, which leads to a radically altered state of consciousness.
- At the more prosaic level, this dimension implies that we cannot hope to understand religion unless we engage with it directly. We have to experience religion first-hand to appreciate what it means to the believer emotionally as well as intellectually.

7 - The Material Dimension

- All religions have objects, artefacts, buildings, pilgrimage sites and the like which play an important role in the faith. However, as is the case with, say, Judaism and some Christian denominations, some religious movements eschew external symbols.
- Their buildings are often beautiful in their austere simplicity, but their intention is to be without artistic images which might seduce people from the thought that God is a spirit who transcends all representations.
- The material dimension includes everything from icons, house of worship, pilgrimage site and holy cities.

The Dimensional Approach – P. Byrne

P. Byrne (1988) '*Religion and the Religion*', in: S. Sutherland et al (eds.) *The World's Religions*, p.7

“We shall define ‘religion’ as a type of human institution. It is a complex to be found in human history having the following four important dimensions: the theoretical (e.g. beliefs, myths and doctrines), the practical (e.g. rites, prayers and moral codes), the sociological (e.g. churches, leaders and functionaries) and the experiential (e.g. emotions, visions and sentiments of all kinds) ... and which is distinguished by characteristic objects (gods or sacred things), goals (salvation or ultimate good) and functions (giving and overall meaning to life or providing the identity or cohesion of a social group.”

–Does not focus exclusively on ‘spiritual beings’ or ‘the sacred’ (though space is made for that) nor from the point of view of function (though space is made for that too).

–Rather characteristics/ dimensions.

–Religious Concepts – Action – Groups – States of Mind – later added Dynamics.

–Four Modes of Religions: Existential (faith); Intellectual (beliefs); Institutional (organizational); Ethical (conduct).

Exercises

- Think of your own examples of Religious Dimensions. Compare and contrast with P. Byrne and Ninian Smart above.
- Identify several examples of each dimension of religion. Why do you identify these examples as you do?

References

- Girard, Rene (2001 [1999]) *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll & New York: Orbis)
- P. Byrne (1988) 'Religion and the Religion', in: S. Sutherland et al (eds.) *The World's Religions*
- Smart, Ninian (1998) *The World's Religions*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Wiebe, Donald (1981) *Religion and Truth: Towards an Alternative Paradigm for the Study of Religion* (The Hague: Mouton)