

Approaches to the study of religion



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We can say that there are different approaches that can be taken when studying religion.

For the last four decades universities and schools have been acting in response to a constant, steady demand for courses upon the study of religion. The people who take these courses are usually involved in religion themselves, many are involved in religious communities or, wishing to know more and learn regarding the religious beliefs of others. Others have no clear vision upon their religious identity and are searching possible traditions, ready to meet their spiritual exploration. So they start looking for different approaches to their study, bringing along different opinions and whatever the process and methodology is, will bring them information from which eventually they will find answers or give opinion.

(Peter Connolly, pp1-2 Approche to the Study of Religion, Biddles L. T. D.)

The author will attempt to evaluate the strengths and weakness of two approaches to religion and try to compare the work of the two representations and their methodology. The first is Professor Ninian Smart as he wrote widely, regarding different topics in religions, with papers and articles appearing in a vast range of publication and television worldwide developing his own vision and philosophy of human progress and spiritual evolution. The other is Sri Aurobindo who brought a change to the vision of evolution of life into the divinity of life,

In his own words: “ Man is on a transitory passage. He is not final. The stage from man to super being is the next which depends from the approach of the achievement on the evolution on earth. It is the logic of Nature’s process”.

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The works of both Sri Aurobindo and Ninian Smart shows two drastic and completely different approaches to religion. The author as part of his degree course has studied these two vastly differing approaches.

Ninian Smart's approach to religion is described in his academic literature as a completely new way to the thinking of religion. He illustrate the introduction of Phenomenology saying, a lot of opinions have been written about not only the physical interchange of races but;, also ethnical and cultural, and especially upon values, so what take place when religions and their tradition convene? Will the globalization lead to a kind of universal religion, as prediction might lead, or it will be turned in a lively variety of many different beliefs? Smart contemplated these question for many years investigating various religions in the world. He explains that such experience definitely will change positions on previous views regarding religious tradition. It may perhaps intensify your religious experience. It all depends on the person you are and the personal period of life you are going through. (Scott London , the future of religion an Interview with Ninian Smart June 1999 issue ofThe Witnessmagazine.) We can confirm that the method of study that Smart used in his approach comprehend both external and internal analysis of religion, characterized by phenomenological perspectives.(James L. Cox, p. 159. A guide to the Phenomenology of religion . key figure , formative influence and subsequent debate. Continuum International publishing group . 2006.)Of course the phenomenological approach employed by Smart can be interpreted as an attempt of taking into consideration the individual experience of religion a at the same time trying to separate from it. The method used was to compare the subjective

experience with the intent of shaping the arrangement of religion itself from within the structure. This approach can be better understood in his ritual dimension

involvement with worshipping, meditations, pilgrimages, sacrifices and healing activities . Of course doctrinal and philosophical dimension is to be taken in consideration without living behind the experimental and emotional dimension and the important ethical and legal dimension.(Ninian Smart, pp10-12, Dimension of the sacred an anatomy of the world's beliefs , Harper Collins Publisher 1196) We see from Smart's classificatory account

- The Experiential and Emotional Dimension
- The Narrative or Mythic Dimension
- The Doctrinal
- The Philosophical Dimension
- The Ethical and Legal Dimension
- The Social and Institutional Dimension
- The Material Dimension
- The Practical and ritual dimensions (BBC. Religion)

Smart's perspective in sustaining a phenomenological perception to the methodology of approach to the study, is far different from the approach that Sri Aurobindo use. First of all we have to say that both, Smart and Aurobindo have not defined religion from objective point of view but rather to determine religion in terms of its own value. Both methods tried to avoid the phenomenological approach. Personal experience is crucial to any understanding of religion . On this particular account Aurobindo discovers

the relation or union, he favours, what he identifies as spiritual psychology and integral methods, but for both he confirms that the objective is to be understood and interpreted in terms of subjective. (D P Chattopadhyaya p1 integral sociology and dialectical sociology, Shri Jainendra press 1976)

From its approach, we understand that Sri Aurobindo begins his work clearly within religious prospect, particularly his own relation with yoga, he explains; the practice is not for ourselves alone, but for the Divine;

The intent is to find occupation of good in the world, to outcome a spiritual conversion and to bring down a divine nature and a divine life into the mental, vital and physical nature and life of humanity. Its object is not personal, although is a necessary condition of the yoga. So with Aurobindo is clear the goal is more directly mystical, to become one with the divine. (Michael T. McLaughlin, p96, Editrice Ponteficia Universita` Grecoriana Roma 2003) In many occasions he confirmed that he does not intend to promote any old religion or to find a new one and he strongly oppose religious particularism.

So he is proposing a mystical goal and from his yogic teachings he guides, shows and achieves that. (Stephen H. Phillips. p79, Aurobindo`s Philosophy of Brahman, E. J. Brill Leiden 1986)

The strength of Smart can be seen that he does not wish to strip religion or faith down to one or two elements say belief in The Virgin Birth and the dogma of "out with the church there is no salvation" but his classificatory account makes it clear that it has many elements and strands. A criticism of his approach is that it is far to scientific and while starting from the

experiential and emotional he soon slips back into trying to seek common themes within all religions

Aurobindo did not just stick to an immanent experience of a divine being but that there must be transcendence within the individual's life which is seen in Auroville with a lived approach to one's faith rather like that which is common within Charismatic and Evangelical Churches. A criticism of Aurobindo's view may be seen that it seeks to remain within religion itself, similar to that of Smart as they both emphasise the importance of the experience of religion, a personal contact with God or Gods, however within Marxism we can see a move away from this religious experience. Aurobindo offers no guidance upon other religions as his account is purely personal. So how would Aurobindo address questions upon doctrine say within the New Testament? These questions within Smart's Classificatory account would help to define a religion. For example different opinions regarding the Trinity between Roman Catholics and Jehovah Witnesses. Also we can see the beliefs, symbolism and teachings of Auroville fitting well within the above detailed classifications of Smart's dimensions of religion

Can we truly compare two totally different views religion one very internal the other very visual? Is Sri Aurobindo truly internal when we have the community of Auroville and a culture around him? Can we categorize all religions within Ninian Smart definitions?

We may conclude saying that maybe religions will never combine into one global faith, but we do think that the society is moving towards a global ideology that have a space for religion and identify the contributions of the

diverse ethnicity and traditions and bring a new way in helping us to work together for the support of human values and spirituality. What may be the way forward in the teaching and definition of religion is to accept the singularity of each religion and each individuals faith and seek ways in which they can be accommodated within a safe international environment that moves away from empirical definitions.