

Empiricism and religion essay

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Empiricism is the doctrine that all knowledge is based on sensory experience, rather than tradition. Naturally, it clashed with religion because it challenged the idea that something could be based on Scripture, revelation, or reason.

Empiricists attempted to use the scientific method to obtain results or observation as proof. In response, theologians would argue that religion was not relevant to the material world which could be scrutinized through objective science, but rather it pertained to the subjective spiritual world. It is based more on inner “experience” which cannot be measured through empirical means. Pluralist critique came from those who argued that people of different faiths had different ideas about what the religious truths are, and no one religion is completely right. Apologists argued that religious experience transcends cultural barriers, and to some degree all religions had some claim to the truth as long as they had a sense of the divine. The core experience is pan-cultural, while the rest of a person’s faith is conditioned by socially learnt dispositions. Western scholars emphasized “experience” when discussing religions. Asian religions, at first glance, seem to be rooted in mystical experience.

However, the relevance of experience in Asian religion is even more modern than its relevance in the West. For example, meditation was originally a ritual that was meant to physically clean the body and communicate with deities. It was only in modern times that this view transformed into something that included “personal experience” in which people search for alternative states of consciousness. The change in perception of what meditation was a response to this “Western cultural imperialism” by Asian

apologists such as the Hindu Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan or Buddhist D. T. Suzuki, who were schooled in the Western way of discussing religion.

Because the West was more advanced when it came to politics, the military, and technology, Asian apologists strove to prove that Asia was more advanced spiritually. They turned the challenge of religion into a tool that could be used to promote nationalism. Radhakrishnan argued that Hindu religion was based directly on the inward spirit, and therefore it was purer than any other religion. Suzuki played a similar role in using the Zen religious tradition in nationalist discourse. He stressed that everything about Japanese culture stemmed from this religion that was based on a spiritual awareness of unity of humans and nature, which stood in contrast to the materialistic traditions of the West. The stress on inward spirituality and personal experience of both Asian apologists drew itself from the 20th century Western way of thinking about religion.

Through utilizing the language of Western scholars, the Asian scholars gained validation for their nations' spirituality. Subjective religious experience became a relevant topic in the 20th century, and had been appropriated by various traditions around the world. The transformation of how Asian religion was perceived was only one example in how religious experience became a key component of modern religious rhetoric. The rest of the article contemplates how to deal with the problems of studying religions based on experiences since any interpretation of a religious experience inherently draws it away from the immediacy that defines it.