

The Seven Dimensions of Religion

Ninian Smart, a scholar of religion, says there are seven dimensions of religion....

Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension: Systematic explanations of religious matters, which may be monotheistic (involving one deity), polytheistic (involving many deities and perhaps lesser spirits), or atheistic (no deities).

Ritual Dimension: Ritual can be either public or private. At one end of the spectrum, ritual is a behavioral or bodily activity (external actions), and at the other end of the spectrum ritual takes place inside a person.

There are different kinds of ritual. For example: focused ritual is something that is “addressed to sacred beings,” while a harnessing ritual or yogic ritual is “a process of self-control that seeks higher states of consciousness.”

Ritual includes rites of passage such as child dedications, marriages, memorial services, etc.

Narrative and Mythic Dimension: Stories that have to do with religion. These stories can concern time, space, deities, death, ethics, and so on.

It’s important to note that in our culture, we’re more interested in whether a given story actually happened, and less interested in the significance of that story. So we tend to judge religious narratives by the standards of historical fact and/or scientific fact, which is not the way those stories have always been judged.

Experiential and Emotional Dimension: There are two “poles” of religious experience: 1. at one pole, people experience of something holy and outside themselves; 2. at the other poled, people experience a oneness with everything in the universe (these aren’t exact opposites, they’re just different).

These two poles lead to different kinds of religious emotions. 1. leads to “fear trembling, respect, humility,” etc. 2. leads to “serenity, confidence, calm, happiness,” etc.

Ethical and Legal Dimension: This dimension of religion tells us how to act. Some religions may have specific laws or regulations to follow, while others may have more general ethical principles. This dimension of religion is influenced by the values of the wider culture, and often by other nearby religions.

Social and Institutional Dimension: Who are the important “experts, functionaries, charismatic figures, and holy persons” and other religious specialists? (prophet, sage; preacher, priest; monk, wanderer; rabbi, teacher; king, ruler; healer, shaman; etc.) Who are the important lay people?

And what kind of religious social system do these people have?

Material Dimension: This includes objects and structures such as: “buildings for worship and ritual, statuary and paintings, the dress and vestments of the priests and so forth, books, amulets and the like, graves, ... sacrificial animals and the like.”

(Ninian Smart includes music in the Ritual Dimension, but I’d argue that it could also be placed in the material dimension.)