

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF  
**Ninian Smart**



# **The Future of Religion: Postmodern Perspectives**

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AND  
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## Mr Christian's seminar

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**Walter H. Capps**

Ninian Smart first came to my attention when I was a graduate student at Yale University in the early to mid 1960s. I had come out of a decidedly parochial (Lutheran) theological seminary training, for which I was generally grateful. But the experience did not leave me with a firm grasp of more representative trends in theology or a strong comprehension of the academic study of religion. Consequently, in addition to the courses that were required for my graduate degree, I experimented with other courses to expand my horizon.

There were three of these that I recall with particular vividness. One was an interdisciplinary offered in the Law School by Professor F. S. C. Northrup, author of *The Meeting of East and West*, which was my introduction to the subject of comparative cultural analysis. This course enabled me to expand on my undergraduate understanding of the history and culture of certain countries and regions of Asia. A second was a course in philosophy taught by Professor Robert Brumbaugh, which utilised the series of being-becoming relationships enunciated by the classical Greek philosophers to provide insight into the structure of most subsequent philosophical orientations. I took advantage of Brumbaugh's insight to correlate the structure of selected medieval Christian theological systems with their Greek philosophical structural precedents. And the third was a course in the philosophy of religion, conducted by Professor William A. Christian, whose purpose was to investigate truth claims in religion by examining the language and linguistic dynamics of selected statements and articles of faith, belief or avowal. Professor Christian had cultivated his own approach to this subject, but he also felt responsible to acquaint us with what he regarded as the most significant scholarship on this subject, much of which, at the time, had its roots in Great Britain.

Thus, it was in Mr Christian's seminar that we read essays by Ninian Smart, whom our professor touted as being among the more astute of the group of young British thinkers. I didn't understand everything I read but was drawn to the very careful way Smart marshalled arguments, and it seemed that the

religious content he invoked was anything but trivial. I recognised that Smart was really on to something and was fascinated by the way he would take simple articles of faith and parse them for meaning, intention, force, and consequence. I surmised that Smart was a thinker one could trust as well as a writer one could thoroughly enjoy. So I quoted his essays extensively when writing the required term paper.

I had no idea, of course, that I would one day meet the man and for nearly twenty years would have the privilege of being a colleague. This happened because Professor Thomas F. O'Dea, then director of the Institute of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, sought Smart's counsel when devising the research programme for the institute, and invited him to come to the Santa Barbara campus to share his ideas. This, to my knowledge, was Smart's first visit there, I believe, in 1970. I recall warning him that someone would ask him about his birth date, not particularly because they were intent in knowing how old he was; rather these Californians would solicit information about his astrological habitation. Just as predicted, the question did arise in the set of questions that were posed at the close of his very impressive lecture; and he answered without giving the slightest indication that this was not the usual lecture circuit query. Then, in 1973, I met him again, this time in Turku, Finland, at the Study Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions (which, by the way, was an extraordinary consultation as well as a splendid affair). My memory of this event was not only how intelligent and witty Smart was – he spoke of 'poly-methodoodling all the day' – but also how much enjoyment we could find together simply in sharing responses to lectures. A few years later, Smart came to Santa Barbara to teach, spending part of the year in California and part of the other at Lancaster University in England. Eventually, he retired from Lancaster and became full time at Santa Barbara. I have seen him frequently and regularly over the years – one of the blessings of my career for which I am most grateful.

After a span of over thirty years, I continue to carry the impression acquired when first introduced to Smart's writings: his passion for clarity, both in his conceptual formulations as well as in his oral and written communication, and that much of what he offers seems deceptively simple and may not be fully appreciated for its profundity and provocativeness. In this respect, his books – most of them consisting primarily of descriptive informational portrayals of the major religions of the world – are full of content of an almost encyclopaedic quality or nature. Often one has to search for the methodological innovations, that is, for the approach to the subject that is distinctively Smart's. Indeed, there is such a perfect marriage between these components of his scholarship that it is frequently difficult to know how to distinguish the one from the other. And this is the way it ought to be, similar in some respects to Immanuel Kant's insight that

*a priori* and synthetic elements are combined or fused in judgements. Smart doesn't write separately on methodology and then separately on content; instead he does both at once, usually without telegraphing what he is doing and without delineating where one of these tasks leaves off and the other begins. Consequently, the reader or listener is treated to a comprehensive descriptive portrayal of whatever religion, worldview or system of values is under scrutiny, while also being treated to a demonstration of how carefully conceived analytical and interpretative principles function.

Since the approach is so integrated, one can start at virtually any point within Smart's 'system' and find one's way to the rest of it. Take, for example, his tendency to make no fundamental distinction between religious and secular worldviews. All self-respecting scholars of religion recognise that their treatment is incomplete unless they give analytical and interpretative treatment to the major religious traditions of the world. Smart proceeds in this fashion too. Yet in each of his descriptive portrayals of the religions, Smart always includes treatment of so-called secular ideologies, or non-formal religious worldviews, as being of the same subject category. And to make the point with consummate force, Smart insists that these secular ideologies exhibit many, if not all, of the same dimensions that are characteristic of the clearly identifiable religions. In *Religions of the West* (1993), for instance, Smart attests that it is 'healthy' to treat 'secular ideologies as kinds of religions'. He adds that secular religions (particularly Marxist orientations in eastern Europe's recent past) have 'worked very much as state religions used to'. Another strong example of secular religion, in Smart's view, is nationalism. Indeed, in *Religions of the West* he illustrates that the seven typical dimensions of religion are vividly present in American nationalism. And his characterisation makes clear that a similar portrayal is applicable to Jewish nationalism, or, more precisely, to the loyalty citizens of Israel feel towards their nation. In other writings Smart makes it obvious that he believes Maoism in China qualifies for similar status and carries similar force. Smart also provides strong hints that capitalism can be approached in multiple religious dimensional terms, and the same may also be true of the by-now nearly canonical complex of assumptions and methods through which Western scholarship tries to make sense of the world and/or engage reality. In addition, Smart regards humanism (which he sometimes identifies as 'secular humanism') as a secular religion or as a phenomenon that invites analysis and interpretation according to the same sevenfold dimensional typology. In the final pages of *Worldviews: Cross-cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (1983), Smart offers evidence that current thematic tendencies, such as 'environmentalism', qualify for the same designation.

With such consistency of attestation and such profundity of examples, Ninian Smart is asking us to take this matter seriously. The initial point is that

religions can be treated like worldviews or ideologies, of which there are both generally acknowledged as well as additional examples. The corollary is that qualification for being identified by this nomenclature has more to do with the item's ability to serve as a worldview than with the presence or absence of formal religious or sacred content. In this regard, nationalism is just as valid as Buddhism, and Marxism can be studied with the same expressed sensibilities necessary for making sense of Islam. This – we trust no one has missed it – is a large claim. It also means that the period of religious creativity cannot be restricted to the roughly thousand years of time in which the major religions of the world came into being. On the contrary, the same interest and motivation responsible for the historical religions are alive and well in the world today and exhibit their own constructed products. All of this also says that religion is not outmoded: it always exhibits a fresh or new face. In addition, there is no strong argument that its services, benefits or intentions have been superseded. In *Worldviews* Smart described the complementarity between historic and current religion as follows:

... in addition to trying to describe as accurately as possible, and with structured empathy, the meaning of past forms of religion, we may also wish to see what those forms still contain in the way of creative messages for our own global civilisation . . . Worldview analysis enables us to communicate not just with our spiritual ancestors, but with one another.

It is therefore not surprising that Smart recommends knowledge of the historic religions as well as understanding 'religion in its interplay with the changes now going on in the world'. Next come the ramifications for education. Here Smart asserts more than the idea that religion is a good subject to study. Rather, his promotion of Religious Studies is intimately tied to his understanding of the purpose of higher education and to his aspirations concerning the place of the academic study of religion within this framework. In support of this view I need merely cite titles such as *Religion and the Western Mind* (1987) or the earlier *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (1973). Both of these books, plus hosts of other studies, attempt to strengthen the academic study of religion within prevailing educational systems. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ninian Smart has been extraordinarily instrumental in establishing centres for the study of religion in colleges and universities throughout the world. Indeed, as noted, it is probably true that he has been more influential in this respect than anyone else. The reason: he believes a liberal arts education to be deficient unless it includes coursework in the major religious traditions of the world. Put in another way: unless there is knowledge of the place and function of religion, social and cultural understanding is incomplete, deficient, and misleading. In virtually every publication he makes the assertion which is so plainly



stated in the introduction to *Religions of the West*: 'In trying to understand the wider world it is important, indeed in many ways imperative, to have some knowledge of the worldviews, both religious and secular, which underlie our various civilisations. This is as true of today's values as it is of ancient, medieval, and premodern cultures.'

Each of Smart's publications also carries the corollary to the primary assertion, which in *Religions of the West* is stated as follows:

Another reason why Religious Studies are vital is that today we are rapidly entering into and helping to construct a global civilisation. The revolutions in telecommunications and airline travel have combined with political turbulence and consequent migrations to bring the peoples of the world into close relationships. In some areas this causes conflict; in other areas it promotes new harmonies between traditions. In either case mutual understanding is an important ingredient. The exploration of religions may itself help to soften some hostile and ignorant attitudes.

But what is this saying? Yes, we recognise that Ninian Smart is attesting that Religious Studies is an essential, indispensable component of a liberal arts education. But he is also suggesting that the study of religion – now expanded to be the study of worldviews (i.e. both religious and secular ideologies) – is an essential, indispensable ingredient in making sense of current global civilisation. Indeed, were Smart pressed on this issue, I am quite confident he would agree to the proposition that nothing is more beneficial or crucial in this respect than our understanding of worldviews. Here the implications and ramifications fall in many directions at once. Smart understands that the formal religions were given a clear role to play in the pre-global civilisation world order, much of which is appropriately described as colonial. In the post-colonial world, religion functions powerfully too, but according to the expanded understanding that the inclusion of secular ideologies denotes. Post-colonial (being global) civilisation requires a precision of understanding every bit as keen as its predecessor version. This helps explain why Ninian Smart has worked so diligently to establish academic programmes in the study of religion throughout the world, and most particularly in those educational centres in locations that were once part of the colonial world. Smart looks to the study of religion to assist the transition from the one orientation to its successor model. Therefore, when he writes that Religious Studies can be of assistance in helping overcome old antagonisms, creating new harmonies, and softening hostile and ignorant attitudes, he has very clear specifics in mind.

Perhaps this is the place to mention that it would be difficult to find a scholar in the study of religion who has seen more of the world or one who has a clearer understanding of its dynamics. Smart knows the rudiments of the

religions firsthand because he has either visited or lived in many of the regions he describes. He has taught and/or lectured in universities throughout the world and has received honorary doctorates from institutions on at least four continents. Though not tested empirically, I think it plausible that no other scholar in the academic study of religion has more students teaching in educational institutions throughout the world. I know they are exercising such leadership in numerous countries in Europe, in the United States. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Sri Lanka, India, China, Hong Kong, Japan and elsewhere. It's almost as if he has utilised the trade routes of the former British Empire to teach a more realistic and benevolent appreciation of relations between nations and cultures than was ever possible under imposed colonial rule.

Yet all of his scholarship, as detailed and precise as it is, maintains openness and flexibility. Recently he gave a highly stimulating, autobiographical lecture in which he identified himself as a 'Buddhist Episcopalian' and talked of the propriety of utilising insights from one religion to augment or correct deficiencies in another. As already noted, anyone who knows Smart's scholarship is aware of the way he approaches religions by identifying the strands or dimensions of which they are composed. What is less well known is how the same schemata can be employed to encourage a blending or joining together of the traditions. Smart recognises that knowledge of other traditions will influence our understanding and appreciation of our own tradition. But his ability to 'parse' religious systems – that is, to identify their strands, dimensions, or structural elements – creates the possibility of hybrid versions and other creative compositions. There is no reason why an individual, who is substantially familiar with more than one tradition, cannot employ this knowledge and understanding to foster creative syntheses. Indeed, there is no reason why the religious traditions must be viewed as finished products, and, therefore, incapable of further development.

In this confessional lecture, Smart described the 'starting points' for the traditions and explained the processes by which the dimensions of the traditions are extensions of these starting points. Christianity, he explained, attests that the human condition is one of sin, whereas Buddhism finds its starting point in the human plight of ignorance. After assessing the pros and cons of each of these orientations, Smart offered the judgement that both are correct: human beings are significantly adversely affected both by sin and by ignorance, neither of which can be adequately accounted for by the other. His plea to his listeners was that they try to gain a sense of the wisdom of each insight and find philosophical, spiritual, moral and psychological ways to accommodate both starting points.

Now, without disputing or debating the particularities of the Christian-Buddhist comparison, a subject that Smart explores in much greater detail in his book *Buddhism and Christianity: Rivals and Allies* (1993), let us try to get some

sense of the power and potentiality of what is being asserted. It is nothing less than this – namely, that relationships between religious traditions were never set once and for all, for all time, without the possibility of further modification, growth and development. Rather, contact between the traditions carries mutual benefits, even to the point of allowing and encouraging each to become redefined. This may sound like a novel thought until one recognises that where definitions of religion are concerned, it has always been this way. No religion can be defined as a monolith; rather, each religion can only be defined in relation to the others with which it is in direct or immediate contact. To know something substantial about Islam, for example, is to know why it is also neither Judaism or Christianity. To know about Christianity is to know about Judaism. And in the combination with which Smart worked, to know why one is a Buddhist is to know how one can also be a Christian, and vice versa. The religions are not mutually exclusive systems. Yes, there are differences and disagreements, but there are also compatibilities and shared insights. And in the discovery of such compatibilities – as well as in the creation of conditions for the same – new forms are created, new alliances are forged, salient insights seek attachment to new systems and networks, formal religions are brought into correspondence with secular worldviews, and the contents of ideology and value are reshaped. It is important to recognise that these definitional practices and procedures are dynamic and ongoing. In addition, this is precisely how the formation of global civilisation proceeds.

This all appeared both profound and deceptively simple on first exposure in Mr Christian's seminar. For me, it is still this way, after rich and stimulating continuous and sustained exposure of over thirty good years. William Christian was right too in his introductory comments, when he suggested that an understanding of the work of Religious Studies and an appropriate expansion of its scope are powerfully assisted by the creative and substantial scholarship of Ninian Smart. It was that way then. It is that way now. And all who have been trying to make sense of this vital dynamic subject are deeply obligated.