

NINIAN SMART

The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge

Some Methodological Questions



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&
the Sociology of Knowledge

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contents

- Preface — vii
- 1 The Science of Religion — 3
- 2 Religion and Theology — 24
- 3 The Nature of the
Phenomenological Objects of Religion — 49
- 4 Religion and Projection — 74
- 5 Religion and Rationality — 92
- 6 Within and Without Religion — 110
- 7 Compatibilities and Religious Materials — 135
- 8 Further Reflections — 149
- Bibliography — 161

The Virginia and Richard Stewart Memorial Lectures

Since the establishment of the Stewart Lectures in 1957, a number of eminent scholars of religion from various parts of the world have each spent a semester at Princeton University sharing their scholarly insights with students and faculty. Established by Miss Marie Stewart in honor of her parents, the lectures are intended to bring a wider and deeper knowledge of the history and values of the great religions to members of the academic community.

It was also the desire of the donor that, when possible, the lectures "be made available for the widest public dissemination by every means. . . ." This work by Professor Ninian Smart is an outstanding example of the scholarly consideration of religion supported by Miss Stewart's generous bequest.

Philip H. Ashby
William H. Danforth Professor of Religion
Princeton University

preface

This rather brief book arises from eight Stewart Seminars which I was invited to give at Princeton University in the early part of 1971. I am very conscious of the honor of this invitation and remember my visit with great pleasure. I am especially grateful to Professor Philip Ashby, Chairman of the Department of Religion, for his kindness, and to Professors Benjamin Ray and John Wilson, with whom I discussed many of the ideas in the book. The former also organized the seminars themselves, and I am conscious of the help given to my thinking by those who attended these meetings. My work in Princeton was also much facilitated by the help given to me by my old friends, both philosophers, Richard Rorty and Amelie Oksenberg Rorty. I made some changes from the first draft delivered in Princeton, partly to expand certain parts of the discussion and to make others a little more concise. I am also grateful to Mrs. Susan Welton for help in the preparation of the final draft.

The Science of Religion
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The Science of Religion

The aim of this book is to investigate the nature of the science of religion, and to show that such a scientific study does not reduce religion away. Many people, it is true, consider the very idea of looking at religion scientifically to be absurd and even distasteful. Absurd, because a scientific approach is bound to miss or distort inner feelings and responses to the unseen. Distasteful, because science brings a cold approach to what should be warm and vibrant. These hesitations about the enterprise are fundamentally mistaken, though understandable. They are mistaken precisely because a science should correspond to its objects. That is, the human sciences need to take account of inner feelings precisely because human beings cannot be understood unless their sentiments and attitudes are understood. One does not need, on the other hand, to bother about feelings in relation to rocks and electrons. As yet, the way in which one may deal with religion scientifically and, at the same time, warmly is imprecisely understood. The goal of this book, then, is to try to throw some light upon the enterprise.

Others may think that it is more worthwhile to write a theology which articulates and guides faith or, alternatively, to write a critique of religion, so that its pretensions and contradictions can be exposed. It is true that much writing in the field has been directed toward questions of truth and falsity, rather than to description and

explanation. Put crudely, there has been much written about the truth of religion and rather less concerning the truth about religion.

On the other hand, the sociology of religion flourishes, from the peaks of theory to the plains and marshes of empirical research. Jews in Detroit, Mormons in Salt Lake City, Spiritualists in Wolverhampton, Buddhist peasants in the highlands of Sri Lanka, Nuer prophets and Dinka in the Sudan—the range of sociological and anthropological studies is immense. The psychology of religion is not what it was, but has yet its moments, and earnest inquiry seeks to correlate or contrast the empirical experiences of Teresa and Tauler with the deliverances of drugs. Meanwhile, historians of religions probe Zoroastrian origins and medieval Shaivism, early Christianity and the Gnostic religions. There is, in short, no dearth of scientific-seeming inquiries into religion.

Nevertheless, an overall strategy of a science of religion is desirable, and has not yet been fully worked out. This is in part due to institutional and historical reasons. Especially in Europe, and to some degree in the United States, the study of religion has tended to grow out of theology, conceived as a church activity. With the coming of a secular society and, more importantly, with the recognition of the plurality of religious traditions, religious studies have been to some extent widened. Nevertheless, there is still some feeling of uncertainty in a transitional period.

The situation has been complicated by the reflexive character of attempts at a scientific treatment of religion. By this I refer to the way in which the application of, for example, modern historical methods to the Christian scriptures has profoundly altered the attitudes of many

Christians to the scriptures—and for that matter has also been a factor in the growth of agnosticism. In brief, the study of religion affects religion. It is not, of course, unique in this: for example, the study of politics influences political behavior to some degree, as when games theory influences nuclear strategy. Nevertheless, the reflexive effect is particularly striking in connection with religious belief, especially because many widely established religions are fairly traditional and to that extent new ideas may be threatening.

The reflexive effect is relevant to some of our present confusion regarding the study of religion. Often it has meant that the primary interest of those involved in the doing of religious history has been extra-scientific—their ultimate interest concerns the truth of the religious system in question. Thus although a great deal of New Testament study has been rigorous and in an important sense scientific, it has generally been instrumental to theological concerns. Again, much of what occurs under the heading of the comparative study of religion has to do with dialogue, encounter, and a theology of religions. That is to say, the ultimate concern of a number of scholars working in the field lies in making sense, from a Christian or some other point of view, of the pluralism of religion. Good recent examples are the writings of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, R. C. Zaehner, and (in his *Avatar and Incarnation*) Geoffrey Parrinder. Parrinder's book, though mainly descriptive, concludes with some Christian reflections upon Hindu avatar beliefs, while Zaehner's *Concordant Discord* explores a number of major religious traditions in order to evolve a theology influenced by de Chardin. There is nothing illegitimate in

such enterprises, and any given religious tradition has to make some attempt to come to terms with the existence of other traditions. But one must understand clearly that in such works the scientific and descriptive study is made subordinate to theological concerns because of the reflexive effect. The reflexive effect has also caused resistance to the scientific study of religion. As Ronald Knox somewhat superciliously said, comparative religion makes men comparatively religious. Biblical scholarship also has seemed to some to be destructive. There is a grain of truth in these reactions, for after all there is or can be some tension between an open and scientific approach and traditional demands, as we have noted. Nevertheless we need to be realistic about the world, and the fact is that there are new ways of discovering historical truths and there are many different and sometimes mutually challenging religious and atheistic traditions.

All this has impeded somewhat the formation of a rounded view of the scientific study of religion. It is interesting in this connection that Peter Berger could find it necessary to add an appendix to his *The Sacred Canopy* on the relation between sociological and theological perspectives. But are they on a par? It is my task here to explore this and a number of related issues.

I have used the expression "the scientific study of religion" a number of times, and in a broader way than perhaps the term suggests. In due course it may be necessary to justify this way of speaking, and shortly I shall attempt to characterize what I understand by the study of religion. But the basic, and fairly simple, contrast to which I wish to draw attention here is that between doing theology and studying religion. Doing theology, in the

proper sense, is articulating a faith. Thus there is little doubt that the major preoccupation of Karl Barth was theological, even if he may have made use in a subordinate way of a fair amount of material drawn from the scientific study of religion: consider his work in the history of ideas, for instance. But, in the study of religion itself, theology is part of the *phenomenon* to be understood. One may give an analogy: the writings of Le Corbusier need to be taken into account in compiling a history of modern architecture, but the writings themselves are geared to practice and are part of the enterprise of being an architect. The historian of architecture need not be an architect. Likewise, a person articulating or defining a given faith is part of the ongoing process of that tradition. Perhaps this way of putting matters is too simple, and it will surely have to be modified later, but it represents a useful working contrast. To return, however, to my opening paragraph, I am far from claiming that the study of religion is the most important thing to be undertaken in connection with religion. Being a saint is more important. But I *would* contend that, in the intellectual firmament, the study of religions is important not only because religions have been a major feature in the landscape of human life but also because a grasp of the meaning and genesis of religions is crucial to a number of areas of inquiry. It is crucial to both Marxist and Weberian sociology; to analytical psychology; to anthropological theories; to the history of ideas; and so on. A colleague of mine was not far amiss in saying that the great thing about studying religion is that we can pinch other people's most interesting problems. Moreover, we should note that we are moving, in the early 1970s, de-

cisively into a new period when religion is taken seriously by Western intellectuals, after a period when, not unintelligibly, theology and religious studies attracted some hostility in the secular environment. Also, we are seeing a slackening of the grasp of a positivism which stood in the way of the appreciation of symbolic and mythic ways of thinking and acting.

If, then, we are to justify the science of religion, it is centrally upon intellectual grounds, not on the ground of its utility or of its capacity to improve people. Indeed, like Socrates, it may corrupt the youth. The current fashions are very useful and favorable, for many flock to courses on Buddhism, mysticism, the sociology of religion, and so forth, thus justifying the creation of posts in a number of areas of religious inquiry hitherto undeveloped. To some extent these fashions are accidental, though it is true that a method of inquiring into and teaching religion which is based upon the logic of the subject will find an echo in the minds of those who come to study it. But in the present discussion I am not concerned with the educational aspect of the study of religion or with its justification in programs of educational institutions, but more with its "inner logic." There are obvious connections between the logic and the practice—connections I have explored mainly for the British context, but relevantly for other contexts, in my *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*.

What, then, is the scientific study of religion? To put the answer briefly and in a somewhat prickly manner, it is an enterprise which is aspectual, polymethodic, pluralistic, and without clear boundaries. It is aspectual in the sense that religion is to be treated as an aspect of

existence. Men behave and react religiously, and this is something that the study of religion picks out; just as economics picks out the economic behavior of people. The study of religion is polymethodic in the sense that differing methods or disciplines are brought to bear on the aforesaid aspect. Thus one needs to treat religion by the methods of history, sociological inquiry, phenomenology, and so on. It is pluralistic because there are many religions and religious traditions, and it would appear that no full study of religion can properly be undertaken without becoming immersed in more than one tradition. It is necessary to emphasize this elementary fact because, in the past, theology has tended to confine itself to one given tradition. The study of religion is without clear boundaries, for it is not possible or realistic to generate a clear-cut definition of religion, or, more precisely, any definition will involve family resemblance, as indicated by Wittgenstein. Such a definition would involve listing some typical elements of a religion, not all of which are to be found in every religion. It is a natural consequence of this that there will be some phenomena which bear a greater or lesser resemblance to religions. Thus it may be that the techniques and insights which one may use and gather in the study of religion can be applied outside the area of religions as strictly and traditionally defined. For example there is no reason why Weberian sociology of religion should not be applied to ideologies. And some aspects of phenomenology of religion can prove fruitful in the study of, say, Maoism. The converse also applies. This is partly why the study of religion must be polymethodic. After all, some disciplines which are primarily not concerned with religion can still make a contribution