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# Ninian Smart: A Tribute

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Ninian Smart was a highly respected academic and world renowned scholar in philosophy and religious studies for more than four decades. A prolific author, and inspiring teacher, Smart influenced hundreds of postgraduate students in the field, many of whom currently hold posts in higher education worldwide. Born in Cambridge 6 May 1927, he died suddenly, only a few days after his permanent return to England, on 29 January 2001.

In his obituary notice for Ninian Smart in *The Independent* (5 February 2001) Adrian Cunningham, a University of Lancaster colleague, justifiably claims that Ninian “was the single most important figure in the development of the subject [of Religious Studies] in British education.” Whereas in the 1950s, claims Cunningham, fewer than twenty people in British universities and colleges taught or researched religions other than Christianity, now virtually every college and university, in one way or another, includes not only Christian studies but Religious Studies more generally. And that change, he maintains, is the result of Smart’s creation of “a new space for thinking about religion.”

There can be no question about Cunningham’s claims regarding Smart’s contribution to the revitalization of the study of religion in Britain and beyond. The advertisement for the professorial post in the new department in the University of Lancaster permitted the candidate to be “of any religion or none,” a privilege Smart extended to every student. In the late 1960s that constituted a radical approach to the study of religion because, as Brian Gate’s put it in his obituary notice

in *The Guardian* (2 February 2001), it allowed Smart to challenge “the intellectual hegemony of much contemporary theology.” But in challenging that hegemony Smart did not take up a negative stance toward religion, even though he sought to provide a framework within which religion and religions constituted appropriate objects for detached, scientific analysis. For Smart, that is, the study of religion in the context of the modern university demanded the same intellectual rigour that characterized all other academic disciplines, yet did not demand either the espousal or rejection of religion by the student. This provided considerable “flexibility” in the “new space for thinking about religion” which was very attractive to a wide range of students. As Penelope Magee, a former student put it in a biographical sketch for a set of essays published in Smart’s honour, his appointment to the Lancaster post “led to a tradition in scholarship and teaching which established Lancaster University as a major centre of the study of religion, attracting students from all over the world” (*Aspects of Religion* [edited by P. Masefield and D. Wiebe], 1994, 3). It was Smart’s conception of Religious Studies as an academic/scientific enterprise, and, more particularly, his understanding of the role of philosophy of religion in that enterprise that attracted me to Lancaster. My interest at the time was focused on the apologetic value of the philosophy of religion, but I felt too confined by the more theological and Christian philosophical concerns that dominated my doctoral studies at McMaster University. Although many scholars in Religious Studies eschewed philosophy of religion because it appeared to share an interest in questions of religious truth with theology, Smart (whose first teaching appointment was in philosophy at the University of Aberystwyth from 1952 to 1955) saw philosophy’s interest in conceptual analysis as a basis on which to differentiate the philosophy of religion from theology. Such analysis is of invaluable assistance to the scientific study of religion, he insisted, because, as he put it, to understand the logical status of religious ideas and concepts is to have increased one’s factual understanding of religion. Smart also insisted, however, that philosophy of religion can make such a contribution to the study of religion only insofar as it remains ancillary to the main work of the history and phenomenology of religion. Smart did not

altogether give up philosophy of religion in the more traditional sense, but even here he transformed the enterprise, differentiating it again from theology by showing that without a solid historical understanding of religion no philosophy of religion could be fully persuasive. A philosophy of religion bereft of historical understanding for Smart was no more plausible than a philosophy of science ignorant of its historical development. Ultimately, however, Smart sought a more substantive philosophy of religion that would contribute to the enrichment of humanity by drawing upon “religious reflection” (or, as he at times also called it, “extended theology”) in addition to the results of the historical and phenomenological study of religion.

This more religious or “theological” phase in Smart’s thought was not—at least during my time at Lancaster—dominant in the early days of the Lancaster experiment. This is not to suggest that “religious reflection” was wholly absent from the concerns of other members of the Department, but rather that Smart intended the Department to reflect concern primarily with the historical, phenomenological, and social-scientific study of religion. Despite having held a chair in theology at the University of Birmingham (1961-1966) before moving to Lancaster, Smart did not engage directly in “religious reflection,” although he always insisted—even in his inaugural address to the University of Lancaster—that it is more important to be religious than to study religion. And it was Smart’s investigations into the possibility of a genuine science of religion free from religious and theological interference that most influenced me. Although completing a dissertation for Smart on “religion’s” capacity to withstand the impact of modern Western science, I eventually found unpersuasive the assumption of the possible compatibility between religious and scientific modes of thought that continued as an essential element in Smart’s philosophical framework and made it possible for him later to merge his new interests in the scientific study of religion with his prior aspiration to create the new natural theology he had proposed in his inaugural lecture on taking up the H. G. Wood chair of theology in the University of Birmingham in 1961.

The increasing emphasis on Smart’s earlier philosophical and theological interests became clearly evident in his writing of the

Gifford Lectures delivered in the 1979-1980 academic year and published in 1981 under the title *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization*. Smart did not limit himself here to simply reviewing and analyzing the relation of religion to broad cultural and political concerns but strove rather “to weave together” a worldview that could provide aid to a troubled society in, as he put it, a planetary context that forces “differing cultures and political systems ... [into] continuing and intimate interplay” (11). And he clearly acknowledged this exercise to be a theological undertaking in a comment published in a *Times Higher Education Supplement* in 1982: “The formation of a worldview which will synthesise elements from the religious, political and cultural part of the West is a sort of theology, and I have attempted it in my Gifford Lectures.” Ten years later Smart’s Christian theological interests clearly predominate in his *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (written with a former student, Steven Konstantine). Although writing as “modern, liberal, scientifically-minded citizens of a plural world” (11), they admit that what they present here is a vision that “is easy to share but impossible to prove” (9) yet one that is nevertheless possible, in their opinion, for reflective people to hold with inner certitude (12).

The theologies presented in these works were produced in what one might call Smart’s “American period.” Smart moved to America with an appointment to the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the mid-1970s (on a half-time basis from 1976 to 1989, and full-time from 1989 to his retirement in 1998). Ninian left me in no doubt about his admiration for the developments in the study of religion in the U.S. which was not, as he used to describe some of his critics, scientifically “purist.” The religious and cultural pluralism, the willingness of American scholars, as he saw it, to consider the novel and new, and the generally more flexible character of American religious scholarship is something he considered especially beneficial to the health and growth of the academic study of religion. And the American Academy of Religion (AAR) of which he became president in 2000, with its extensive membership representing a wide diversity of scholars, its considerable financial resources and therefore power within the academy, and its

publishing program through Scholar's Press stood as testimony for Smart to the vitality of an academic study of religion unparalleled elsewhere in the world. That this extensive membership was dominated by theologians and other scholars involved primarily in "religious reflection" bothered him not at all. In fact, Smart sought to replicate the success of the American experiment in Religious Studies elsewhere in the world by the creation of a World Academy of Religion to complement the more "purist" work of the International Association for the History of Religions. Smart's only concern about the "flexibility" espoused by the AAR was with those he considered committed to a form of establishmentarianism by reducing the study of religion to one or other specific theological tradition.

I do not think Smart's move to America, or his involvement in the AAR, is the "cause" for this return to theology; but there can be little doubt that it provided an impetus to his concern with religious reflection. It is also clear that even though Smart's earlier theological interests re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, he remained actively involved in the historical and phenomenological study of religions and made significant contributions to major issues in the field. Of particular significance in this regard are his analyses of the nature and growth of "religious studies" as an academic project. These, I think, were influenced by Smart's new American context. It seems to me that it is during this period that he explicitly opened up the scope of religious studies to enterprises beyond the descriptive, historical, and empirical. During this period he came to speak of "religious studies" as comprising two or three different kinds of intellectual undertakings, which in various places he referred to as "descriptive and philosophical" or, as the Science of Religion, and philosophy of religion and religious reflection which involves the construction, articulation, and endorsement of a worldview. Those who sought to demarcate Religious Studies from philosophical and theological concerns, and who took it to be comprised simply of the scientific study of religion he came to see as "purists" who he thought failed to see the full nature of the object of their studies. As he and Steven Konstantine put it in their systematic theology, normative questions about religion emerge "in the minds of anyone who begins to reflect about the data of religion" (34).

Smart was aware that not everyone agreed in “Religious Studies” on widening the scope of the discipline to such questions, but for those who did, he and Konstantine provided advice that would, he thought, prevent the discipline from declining into an establishmentarian mentality: “Now those who are happy enough with such philosophical reflections in the study of religion occasionally think in terms of using ‘theology’ *tout court* to cover such reflections. We do not think that this is wise, and prefer therefore to use the phrase ‘religious reflection’ for the process of judging worldviews and perhaps even constructing a new worldview on the basis of what emerges in knowledge about the religions” (34).

Smart’s influence on the academic study of religion, not only on the British and the American scene, but around the world, was considerable. The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster alone “dispersed” more than a hundred graduates into a wide variety of teaching positions in college and universities worldwide. Through his constant travel and numerous visiting lectureships, his thirty books and more than a hundred articles and essays in scholarly journals, and by means of his active participation in such scholarly organizations as the British Association for the Study of Religion, the International Association for the History of Religions, the American Association for the Study of Religion, the American Academy of Religion, and the North American Association for the Study of Religion he was incredibly effective in liberating the academic study of religion from a Christian establishmentarianism to which it was captive in many colleges and universities in the English-speaking world. And in doing that he did indeed create a new space for thinking about religion in the context of the modern university.

Although Smart was assiduous in creating the kind of environment that allowed for a scientific study of religions he nevertheless also devoted his life, as Brian Gates put it in his obituary notice, “to studying world religions for the common good.” His advocacy for religious reflection as integral to the new “religious studies” he inaugurated at Lancaster puzzled some of his friends and former students, but no more so, I think, than their failure to see that the study of religion required not only scientific rigour but a sensitive and

artistic heart puzzled him. He was genuinely disappointed that the debate about the relations between Religious Studies and Theology, as he put it, “rumbled on.” But he continued nevertheless in friendly conversation with those who continued the “rumble.”

Ninian Smart richly deserved the international recognition he received from students of religion and religious scholars around the world. He was truly a world educator, contributing to a clearer understanding of the nature of the study and teaching of religion in public educational institutions from secondary schools and undergraduate colleges through postgraduate programs in the modern research university. In reorientating the establishmentarian character of the academic study of religion dominant in the university setting before the 1960s even the “purists” have gained something from Smart’s immense contribution to the field.