



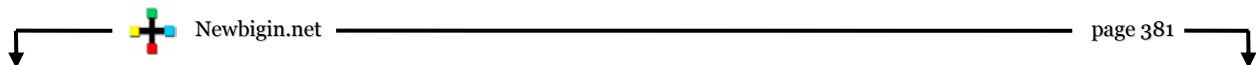
A Review of "Beyond Ideology," By Ninian Smart (Collins, 1981).

1982

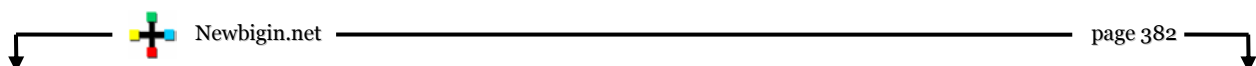
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The subtitle tells us that the book is about 'religion and the future of Western civilization', and Professor Smart gives a concise statement of its purpose when he writes: 'I am trying to frame a way of using the Christian and Buddhist heritages within the circumstances of modernity and of the global city' (p. 285). In this



series of Gifford Lectures there is-as we would expect from the author-a vast range of both knowledge and wisdom and a very sensitive handling of religious issues. What is especially important is that he brings religions and secular ideologies into a single frame of discussion, and shows how the latter-no less than the former derive their power from the use of myth, performative rite and symbol. The range of material is so great, and the movements of thought so swift and subtle, that this reviewer after two careful readings distrusts his capacity to do justice to the book and can only advise that it is a book to be read and pondered by anyone concerned with the future of our planet.

The first chapter surveys the contemporary situation of the religions and secular ideologies, gives ground for describing our world as a 'global city' (not village) and argues that the 'modern' world needs the transcendent even if it does not recognize it. He gives his reasons for regarding Buddhism and Christianity as the two religions which can meet the needs of our planet. In chapter 2 he outlines a methodology for the study of religions and ideologies. The 'beyond' (not necessarily the numinous) is fundamental, and we can study it without necessarily believing in it. A 'methodological agnosticism' is required while we investigate the effects of belief in the beyond but, as scientists, we 'bracket' the differing views as to where their source lies. In fact it is impossible to understand history in merely political and economic terms; 'modernity', no less than religion, is concerned with the power of symbols.

The next four chapters explore, contrast and relate Buddhism and Christianity. There is an especially detailed treatment of the ways in which the same patterns are to be found in Mahayana Buddhism and in Protestant Christianity (and there is much here similar to Otto's treatment of 'India's Religion of Grace'). The contrasts are shown, no less than the similarities. Nevertheless Smart finds the two religions complementary rather than contradictory. In Christianity faith (bhakti) in a personal God predominates over 'consciousness purity' but does not exclude it; in Buddhism the roles are reversed. At the heart of Smart's programme of reconciliation between them lies a very subtle move by which the transcendence which theism acknowledges is equated with the 'emptiness' of the Buddhist analysis. Theologically speaking, this is perhaps the crux of the whole book. Chapters 7 and 8 survey the contemporary secular ideologies, of which nationalism is shown to be the most powerful, taking such other ideologies as Marxism and social democracy into its service and shaping them to its requirements. One whole chapter is devoted to a most illuminating study of China as an example of this rule.

The final chapter draws the argument together by relating both religions and secular ideologies to the 'modern' scientific world view. Smart affirms his own belief that what our global city requires is a kind of society which he defines in terms of 'social personalism'



and 'interactive pluralism'. The sacredness of the person is fundamental, but the person cannot be understood apart from the society of which he is a part. The modern world cannot sustain the person-so understood-without the help of the religious reference to the beyond, but religion must henceforth play a critical not a dogmatic or authoritarian role. Smart's own discipline, the study of religions, has an essential part to play in making possible such an interactive pluralism.

Such a book must be, and surely will be, discussed intensively for a long time. A short review only allows a few questions'. In the methodological suspension of belief, which are the beliefs which are not suspended? Religion is to have a 'critical' function in society; but all criticism (as Polanyi has shown so clearly) rests upon beliefs which are uncriticized. In this case it is not difficult to identify these beliefs; what is their basis? The religions and ideologies are brought to the bar of science, but there is no suspension of belief in the claims of the latter. Finally, the separation of world views into religions and ideologies (in spite of all that is done to demonstrate their affinities) presupposes a certain belief about the 'beyond'. This is throughout defined in terms of 'religious' experience. Is this justified? Granting the legitimacy of a methodological suspension of belief for specific purposes, can there be any encounter with the real while that suspension is maintained? Can we find what is true by considering what is desirable for the future of our planet? Does not the method in effect rule out the possibility of an actual revelation? Does this not explain why-in the end-experience of the transcendent becomes fused with experience of the void?

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