

Chapter 6 Knowledge and Religion

Ninian Smart's Seven Dimensions of Religions and TOK-related points

The relationships between the ideas are interconnected. The dimensions themselves are not meant to represent conceptually distinct categories (*ritual* and *religious experience*, for instance, can be identified as an element in many of the other dimensions), nor are the TOK points meant to be distinct.

Students and teachers would need to provide real-world examples to illustrate and unpack fully these ideas.

	Explanation of Smart's dimension	TOK connections: Links to individual knowers' knowledge and shared knowledge of the community	TOK connections: Role of different sources of knowledge ('ways of knowing')
The ritual dimension	As discussed elsewhere in the chapters on Indigenous knowledge systems and religious knowledge systems, rituals form an important part of people's religious practice. Rituals include public and private acts of worship, various ceremonies around rites of passage (eg, weddings, funerals, 'coming of age' ceremonies) and membership ceremonies.	Ritual provides an explicit link between outward behaviour with inner beliefs (shared knowledge of the community and the individual's personal knowledge) and helps transfer those beliefs from the community to the individual. See section on ritual in Chapter 5: Knowledge and Indigenous Societies.	They often use mythological language thereby linking a 'modern' individual with a mythological/historical background of a religious system. They often provoke mystical experiences in the individuals practising rituals, thereby providing further emotional connections between the individual and the community and/or the doctrines.

	Explanation of Smart’s dimension	TOK connections: Links to individual knowers’ knowledge and shared knowledge of the community	TOK connections: Role of different sources of knowledge (‘ways of knowing’)
The mythological dimension	Myths also are discussed in the chapters on Indigenous and religious knowledge systems. Smart argues that religions utilize myth as a way of symbolizing the invisible world beyond our own, and its relationship to the real world around us. Myths may provide the source, explanation or justification of a religion’s ethical values.	Mythological understanding, being an exercise in interpretation , allows individuals to develop a personal understanding of core values which might run parallel to the ‘official’ doctrines, or dogma, of a religion. Myths help individuals understand the core values of a religion and help orientate individuals in relation to their journey towards enlightenment or salvation.	Myths create imaginative links between the invisible world and the real world. They open the door to intuitive understandings of our place in the wider cosmos in a way that perhaps reason would not be able to articulate. They provide another form of explanation which might not otherwise be available.
The doctrinal dimension	While religious traditions often have a variety of beliefs within them, they generally have a core system of principles and values. Any variety of beliefs are constrained by these shared principles. The doctrines of religious knowledge systems represent an attempt at a coherent and consistent articulation of the fundamentals giving the system clarity and intellectual power.	Doctrine represents the agreed upon core of the religion. It represents most clearly the shared knowledge of the community. Often an individual must accept these principles as a sort of ‘membership criterion’.	The doctrines represent a rationaly defensible set of coherent and consistent fundamentals. Different elements will be consistent with others and together they will provide believers with justifications and explanations of the world around them. Doctrine is often determined through a careful rational process . Even in cases where doctrine is revealed, a systematic analysis of the doctrine in relation to shared experience of the world and other beliefs in the system.

	Explanation of Smart’s dimension	TOK connections: Links to individual knowers’ knowledge and shared knowledge of the community	TOK connections: Role of different sources of knowledge (‘ways of knowing’)
The ethical dimension	One of the primary functions of religious knowledge systems is to provide a consistent and coherent set of values to guide the behaviour of individuals. Religions provide rules and laws and therefore the context in which individual behaviour is managed. The Torah of Judaism and the attributes of a ‘gentleman’ in Confucianism are examples of this dimension.	A doctrine or a series of ethical guidelines must be lived by individuals; the actions promoted by the religious system must be accepted and enacted by individuals. The role of ritual is partly to embed these ethical beliefs. Looking at it from another perspective, people often experience a deep shame or inadequacy and look to the ethical teachings of a religious system to help overcome their perceived weaknesses.	The ethical precepts (general rules that guide our behaviour) of religious systems are rarely arbitrary, but are more likely rationally justified and explained with clear reference to the central doctrines. While the source of ethical principles might have heavy emotional content (sin, despair, suffering), the solutions to these emotional sources are explicitly rational and justified with reference to doctrine.
The social dimension	Religious knowledge systems are realized in the structures of social collections of people related systematically. These are the institutions of ‘organized’ religion, like ‘The Roman Catholic Church’, or ‘The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ (Mormons). These communities are more or less hierarchical and systematized, and often use doctrine to establish boundaries. Like any other social institution, they have different	Individuals often are members of a particular religious institution and following the rituals of one over another is one way in which individuals might claim this membership.	As in the secular realm, different social institutions will use various methods to distinguish themselves from other institutions. Their buildings and architecture and costume may look unique (sense perception) and invoke emotional responses. Their worship, prayer and rituals might impact individuals in different ways (language, emotion, intuition). Their activities, like schools, charity work, liturgy ¹ might provide different modes of

¹ **Liturgy** are the regular and formal forms of worship. ‘Liturgy’ is used mainly to designate Christian orders of service and worship.

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	governing systems, membership rules and ethical guidelines, but they are not necessarily the same as the wider community of believers. ‘Christians’ for instance is a far wider grouping than the institutionalized ‘Anglican Communion’ (the Church of England).		transference of knowledge (language, reason, imagination).
The experiential dimension	Many scholars believe this to be the core of all religious knowledge systems. This dimension relates to the highly personal experiences of individuals which are often characterized as awesome ² , dread, mystery, devotion, ecstasy or bliss. Often these sorts of experiences are part of the origins of religious systems (Mohammad’s revelations, Krishna’s revelation to Arjuna, Siddharta Gautama’s experience beneath the Bodhi tree).	Religious experiences are deeply personal, but necessarily entirely internal. Ritual worship might be coupled with collective experiences in the congregation, or groups of people might accept some natural event as divine action in the world. Other experiences like visions or trances are inherently internal and deeply moving. For any experience to be accepted as sacred or religious, the individual generally has to have a set of background beliefs already which are used to interpret the experience.	Ritual might be considered a source of knowledge here in that participation often leads to some form of experience, whether it be the relatively common experiences associated with normal worship practices (communion or meditation), through the more emotional rituals of some rites of passage (like baptism, marriage), to sometimes more extreme rituals like some Indigenous vision-inducing rites, or the rites of mystical groups like Islamic <i>sufis</i> .

² **Awesome** here referring to the feeling of awe – a deep respect filled with wonder and fear.

	Explanation of Smart’s dimension	TOK connections: Links to individual knowers’ knowledge and shared knowledge of the community	TOK connections: Role of different sources of knowledge (‘ways of knowing’)
The material dimension	Religious knowledge systems produce material objects, like buildings and artefacts and costumes. These objects symbolize or manifest the supernatural or sacred. Buildings (churches, temples) will create sacred space, while objects (Hindu sculptures, Jewish Torah scrolls and communion vessels) can be thought of as bringing the divine into reality.	Similarly, for experiences, for a sacred object to have meaning or significance for an individual, that individual must already have a set of beliefs through which to interpret the object. These objects then should be thought of as being produced by the community, rather than being constitutive of that community. Even artefacts like the tablets of Moses or the objects found by Joseph Smith ³ were found by an individual already deeply immersed in the main doctrines of Christianity.	Imagination and faith are crucial here, insofar as interpreting <i>any</i> object as having a significance beyond itself requires a cognitive leap.

³ **Joseph Smith** was reported to have found golden plates in 1823, hidden in the woods of New York state. They were the source of the *Book of Mormon*, the sacred text of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.