

SEEING “RELIGION” AS A WESTERN CONSTRUCTION: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Considering the concept of “religion” as a construction in western culture is not new. There are several possible meanings attributable to the term “religion”. Some people define religion as a way of binding a certain group of people together by means of rituals etc. Another possible meaning is that religion can bind people with a supernatural being i.e. God. If this second meaning is taken, it is applicable especially, if not exclusively to the Abrahamic faiths which are monotheistic i.e. Judaism, Christianity, Islam. If we consider other “major religions” which do not fall into the above cluster, only Zoroastrianism and a phase of Vedic religion fall into this definition. Hence there is an attitude among some people when religion is defined, a huge part of the eastern culture is neglected. The present study attempts to take a critical overlook on that. The present study primarily aims to examine the notion of considering “religion” as a western construction with a careful attention on the differences and similarities among religious traditions and finally seek the possible applications of the term “religion”. In fact the study of “religion”/belief systems was brought to light by the emergence of Euro-centric knowledge. Especially European colonization paved way to the curiosity of studying the colonized societies. As some critics like Talal Asad said, the concept of “religion” was shaped by western ideas. In this study, a special attention will be paid to the dictionaries and works by modern scholars. In such textual references, some definitions of the concept of “religion” will be mainly concerned for the study. Considering “religion” as a Western construction is historically true with regard to the older definitions of religion which consider faith in a creator God as a necessary constituent of religion. But this confined definition was successfully broadened by several scholars by re-defining the concept of religion, including more belief systems into their scope of study. Many belief systems have been playing considerable socio-political roles in different contexts. Even without a concept of “God”, almost every belief system has common notions like “belief”, “sacredness”, “transcendence” etc. which make them easier to be identified in one term. How these concepts were developed in the course of religious history and how these concepts authentically belong to such belief systems is another point to discuss. But on that basis, rejecting the “religiosity” of eastern belief systems is a huge mistake.

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