

Chapter Two Summary

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Recognizing bias, which is ingrained in all of us, is the first step toward critical thinking in academic work. Yet when scholars and students approach their own courses, fields, or disciplines they rarely recognize their own biases. Therefore, in any field it is necessary to recognize bias.

In Religious Studies the best example of a pervasive bias is in the neglect of African religious traditions. Despite the fact that African religions have millions of adherents most textbooks spend only a few pages discussing them. In fact, until the publication of this book the most pages any popular textbooks devoted to discussing African religions was twenty.

Even then most of the comments were derogatory and did not take African religious traditions seriously. Yet as Fred Welbourn, who first studied physics, pointed out in his now classic text *Atoms and Ancestors* (1968) the type of beliefs most people balk at when discussing African religions are little different from popular understandings of electricity or the atom.

Textbooks and journal articles since the early nineteenth century that discuss African religions have suffered from a racist bias, even though their authorities view themselves as “liberal,” and none are remotely racist. Although the influence of African religions on others is great, they are generally ignored and treated in a very dismissive way. For example, there is virtually no recognition that St. Augustine of Hippo and Tertullian were in all probability black.

Ninian Smart’s book *The World’s Religions* is an example of the unfavorable treatment African religions receive in popular textbooks. These shortcomings include the following:

1. Smart treats the diversity of religion in the Indian subcontinent as an exciting and creative phenomenon, yet dismisses African religious diversity.
2. He notes that whereas Indians direct worship to many gods, Africans practice a “refracted theism” or an inferior form of religious consciousness.
3. Smart claims Indians possess a mythic system with “a thousand themes” yet he reduces African mythologies to “death and disorder” and tricks.
4. Sacrifice in the Indian context is a “central ritual,” Smart says, but he dismisses sacrifice in the African context as merely “a gesture of communication with god.”
5. Smart says Indian expressions of anthropomorphism represent “a splendid act of imagination,” but views the same in African society as limited and simplistic.
6. African religions are seen as having a particular problem in terms of their relation to “modern science,” yet Smart gives a positive assessment of Australian Aboriginal religion on this count.
7. While Smart acknowledges Christianity’s long history in Africa, it is portrayed as a one-way street where Africans adopted Christianity yet didn’t influence the outside world.

Prior to the Enlightenment, African philosophy, and spirituality were well-received and respected in Europe. One can make a case that modern racism originated in the Enlightenment, in that many of the primary Enlightenment thinkers held a very low opinion of Africans. Voltaire set the tone by dismissing Africans as almost sub-human. This type of

attitude was perpetuated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, and philosophers like Hegel.

Accordingly, by the time of the World Congress of Religions in 1893, African religions had disappeared from the vision of progressive scholars. A similar bias regarding India is evident in early nineteenth-century literature, yet the outlook of many Europeans in this respect changed by the middle of that century. Nonetheless, there was no parallel escalation in the appreciation of African values so that even modern textbooks reflect a deeply rooted bias against African religions.

One reason that helps account for the minimal attention given African religions is the unavailability of religious texts containing the scriptures of African religion. Most scholars rely on written texts for their interpretation of religion, but in the absence of such, often all that Western scholars knew about African religions was based on sensational accounts from traders and missionaries concerning the “primitive” practices of Africans. Thus, very few European scholars took African oral traditions seriously.

Meanwhile, with the assistance of intellectual movements like Vedanta and Theosophy that allowed crude rituals to be reinterpreted in sophisticated ways, Indian religions attained a respectability among scholars that was never attained by African faiths. Such interpretations led to further refinements that produced schools of apologists like C. A. F. Rhys-Davids who wrote on Buddhism. Such people saw in Indian religions an alternative to the spiritual bankruptcy of the West. This contributed to the development of religious studies which prizes Indian religions while virtually ignoring their African counterparts.

- *Who is Who?*
 - Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a radical French philosopher who advocated Deism and a Socialist vision of society. His most influential works were: *Emile* (1762), *The Social Contract* (1762)
 - David Hume (1711-1776) was a skeptical Scottish philosopher, historian, and essayist, whose radical empiricism has had a profound influence on modern thought. His main works, for the study of religions, are: *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (1779), *The Natural History of Religion* (1757).