

The Meaning and End of Religion

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Over the weekend I read [Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*](#) (1962). I knew a little about this book from Talal Asad's 2001 [article](#) (jStor paywall), which I suppose is the main way most anthropologists of religion have come to know its content too. Asad lavishes praise on Smith at the beginning of the article—the book is a 'modern classic', and so on—but most of his article is a pretty unrelenting takedown. I have always taken it for granted that Asad's precis is a reliable description of Smith's position, but now I've actually read the book, I've found that the argument is much more subtle, and that many (but not all) of Asad's criticisms are unfair.

Smith begins his book by asking a question that had exercised many other scholars before him: 'What is religion?'. However, his answer is quite original. Religion, he argues, is not a constant feature of human experience, but a historical phenomenon which, being historical, had a beginning and has continued to change. As it is changing and heterogeneous, it sometimes has included things that at other times were excluded. Therefore attempting to understand 'religion' as if it was a stable thing is bound to be misleading. There is little we can say about it as a category, except to trace its history, and he therefore calls for the term to be dropped as an analytical tool altogether.

Asad writes that Smith is the first anti-essentialist theorist of religion, but that's not all he is, and for me he stands awkwardly between the essentialists and the anti-essentialists. His account of the history of the religion concept is in some ways much more wide-ranging and complex than more recent accounts with which I'm more familiar.

Yet in his claim that the experience of the transcendent is universal and in some sense ahistorical, he looks like earlier generations of anthropologists/sociologists/historians of religion, such as Durkheim and Frazer, who sought to define religion as a trans-historical category. And there are precedents, too, for the confessional position that the true purpose of religious practice is a personal relationship or encounter with the transcendent, for example, in the work of [Evelyn Underhill](#).*

Smith predicted that sociologists would be uncomfortable with the idea of building the category of the transcendent into their studies. It does make me uncomfortable, and my instinct is to seek to historicize the transcendent—is the transcendent/immanent opposition really universal, as he assumes? can't its development be traced? isn't it dependent on a certain kind of cosmology?—but the sophistication of Smith's writing has certainly made me a bit more open to the idea....still, if you'll permit me to mangle a metaphor, I can't help feeling that in throwing the bathwater out of the analytical bath, he's kept back a bit, mistaking it for a baby. If you see what I mean.

Smith argues that religion is a confusing term that is used to refer to a number of different things. These things are, he says, quite distinct, but they are conflated as a result of the contemporary application of the term 'religion' to all of them. They are (48f):

- **(1) A personal relationship to transcendence, piety** (in this sense we say someone is more or less religious than ten years ago)
- **A system of beliefs, practices, values, or whatever, extending over time and space** (in this sense we distinguish one religion from another)—this can be further analysed into two separate phenomena: **(2) the ideal religion** of theologians, seldom if ever realised in life, and **(3) the messy, human reality** of sociologists
- **(4) Religion in general**, as opposed to other realms of life

For Smith, the most important of all of these is the first, which he proposes to call 'faith'. He says that faith—a relationship of obedience, submission or recognition of the transcendent, is a human universal. This faith finds expression in practices, art, music, theology and so on, but they are not it. The phenomena described by (2), (3), and (4) are, unlike personal faith or piety, historical developments and are therefore messy, heterogeneous, and without a stable essence.

The conflation of these four aspects under the rubric of 'religion' leads to a number of problems. These problems are not consistently distinguished by Smith, and the following enumeration may just be my reading, but I think a passage near the very end of the book, where he explains that his argument has relevance to religious people, to students of religion, and for humanity at large, does indicate that he thinks of them as separate problems.

Problem 1: the religious problem. As a religious person, Smith thinks that faith, piety, the personal encounter of an individual with the transcendent, is undermined when people conflate it with its expression. The result is a focus on contingent externals, rather than the relationship itself. He doesn't argue, I think, that the external expressions of faith is unimportant (this is key to my disagreement with Asad) but rather that treating them as *religion* may lead people to neglect faith and to become too attached to specifics that should be seen as accidents of history.

Problem 2: the sociological problem. As the meaning of the term 'religion' has a history, it is confusing when applied anachronistically across periods in history, or ethnocentrically to other cultures, and it should be dropped. For instance, the idea that religion is distinguished from the secular is distinctively a characteristic of European religion, because there Christianity came to dominate, but existed alongside political traditions with classical roots, which only then were understood as secular. When looking at specific traditions, such as Buddhism or Islam, we should not look for a defining essence or genius, but accept that they are ever branching, heterogeneous, contingent accumulations. When trying to understand the influence of a religious tradition on an individual follower of that tradition, we can take into account only those aspects of the tradition of which the follower is aware, rather than trying to define the essence of the religion explaining his or her actions in the light of that essence.

Problem 3: the human problem. Smith suggests that the reification of religion is the cause of conflict. If we recognised the universality of the human relationship with transcendence—that is, of faith—we'd learn to tolerate and appreciate each other's concrete expressions of that relationship.

* Thanks to my colleague, Benjamin Wood for pointing me to Underhill's work!

References

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