

A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR W. C. SMITH

Delwin Brown

In this world of disarray, about which Professor Smith speaks at the beginning of his paper, every blessing is a welcomed one. For the theologian few blessings could be more welcome than to hear, as we have heard this afternoon, a distinguished historian of religion defend theology, indeed, defend its place even in the university.

The significance of Professor Smith's defense of theology in the academy is as singular as the event which it celebrates. In each case a historian of religion asserts the importance of the role of theology in our culture and in these times--Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith by his argument on theology's behalf, and Professor Jane I. Smith by her acceptance of the academic leadership of this theological institution.

The argument of the one Smith and the action of the other signal the end of an era. For the truth is that the emergence of the history of religions during the past century, as vitally important as that has been, has in part been won through a critique of theology, frequently as a more than muted rejection of theology's validity, at least its academic validity. The history of religions was said to be an academic enterprise, theology an ecclesiastical one. The history of religions was presented as objective and dispassionate, theology as biased and prejudicial. The history of religions was construed as the pursuit of dynamic truth, theology as the perpetuation of a static creed. The history of religions open, theology closed. By what they have chosen to say and to do, Professors Wilfred Smith and Jane Smith make it clear that that time is past, and they call for the new, mutually enriching relationship of these two modes of inquiry, theology and the history of religions.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's account of the nature and task of theology is an important part of this new era. I agree with its basic intent. Both theologians and historians must take their data seriously, seeking to learn from their subject matter. Both theologians and historians of religion must be open and inclusive in their visions, testing their claims to truth in the broadest range of our public communities of discourse. And both enterprises are part of the humanities, that which seeks to understand what it means truly to be human.

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For these reasons Professor Smith insists that theology belongs in the university no less than in the seminary. And for these reasons I believe he is right. But precisely because what he says is so extraordinarily controversial today, it is all the more important, I think, that the argument be stated with utmost care.

As I understand his lecture, Professor Smith offers two quite different types of argument in defending theology's place in the academic world. On the one hand he suggests an account of the nature of the theological enterprise, making the points I have just noted: theology, like every other humanistic discipline aims at being a fair and evidential inquiry, is open to data from all quarters, is committed to analysis on the basis of broadly defensible criteria of truth or adequacy, etc.

But where Professor Smith may go too far, I think, is in at least suggesting reasons of another kind, reasons having to do not with the nature of the discipline, whether theology or the history of religions, but reasons having to do with the nature of religion--the truth of religion or the universality of some of its elements.

"Part of the current intellectual task," Professor Smith tells us, "...is to enhance the awareness of the transcendent dimension.... Since those dimensions are there, it has been an intellectual error not to see them" (p. 13). If Smith's point is merely that religion is there, that its claims, hopes, and sensibilities are absolutely central to the dynamics of cultural traditions, and, therefore, that religion must be understood to the extent that these cultural traditions are to be fathomed, then surely he is right.

Religion is there, and it is culturally effective. Therefore, its disciplined study in the academy is legitimate, indeed crucial. Theology is a critical analysis of the meaning and truth of the claims about the self and world rooted in the life of these religious traditions. Therefore theology is one dimension of the study of religions. It too, then, is a field of academic inquiry.

But if Professor Smith is defending the academic study of religion in general or theology in particular on the grounds of a conclusion that religion itself is true or universal, that, I should think, is quite another matter. I do not believe theology belongs in the university because we know that "transcendence is there" or "revelation is universal." I believe it belongs in the academy because people engage in religious actions and make religious claims--in short, because people are religious, and their religiousness molds their lives and their cultures.

Judgments about religion--whether what it says is true, whether some of its elements are universal, etc.--judgments such as these, it seems to me, should be offered on the basis of

whatever evidence there is, as the *outcome* of the academic study of religions. They are not, so far as I can tell, the *grounds* for legitimating the study of religion, theological or historical.

Politics or poetry will illustrate my point. Humans engage in political thinking and action. Humans engage in poetic expression. Whatever these activities refer to, whatever their level of truth, if it can be shown that politics and poetry are important for an understanding of human life, then the disciplined study of politics and poetry belongs to the task of the university. For the same reason, I should think, theology belongs in the university. Religions are central to cultures, to their peoples, to the dynamics of their lives--to their ability to live, to seek to live well, to hope to live better. The study of religions, including theological study, therefore, belongs in the university if anything does.

I am grateful to Professor Smith for his keen defense of the basic position which, I take it, we fully share. This is a time of disarray in many respects, not least of which being our understanding of the task of the academy. Professor Smith has contributed significantly to our better understanding of the human and humane purpose of academic inquiry, and to the role of theology in that undertaking.

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