

A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR W. C. SMITH

Sam Gill

We are entering an exciting period in our history and I thank Professor Smith for reminding us of it. Surely there is no clearer sign of the excitement of this period than the installation of Jane Smith as Dean of a School of Theology.

A Smith delivering a lecture in honor of a Smith--that got me to thinking. A smith is a person who makes things of metal. I was myself forged in the rather hot fires of Jonathan Z. Smith's smithy. Today we do not have a redundancy of Smiths, rather we have a compounding of Smiths, sort of Smith to the second power. I am sure that Dean Smith's mettle, to play on words, will be tested again and again and I am confident that it will not only hold up, but that it will attain a brilliance, a luster, a polish in the challenges it meets. Jane, I congratulate you, I welcome you, and I look forward to the unfolding Smith era at Iliff.

My task is to test the mettle of the other Smith, Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, at least in terms of his discussion of theology and the academic study of religion.

As Professor Smith placed theology in the context of the academic study of religion, he made the following statement: "The world's religious history is the scene of God's relations with humankind, and of humanity's relations with God. This statement," he went on to say, "seems to me incontrovertible, whatever one thinks the word 'God' refers to." It is here that I want to focus my response. The issues are, as I understand them: what is the place and role of theology in the academic study of religion; what is the place and role of theology in the history of religions; or, broadly put, what ought theology be? Professor Smith described the task of theology as "telling the truth about God," and as aspiring to "express in specific, finite terms as much of infinity as we are able to envision." For Professor Smith there are no geographical or historical limitations to the field of theology, because God has been encountered by all of humankind no matter when or where in history. For Professor Smith, since all of the world's religious history is a theological study, for it is a study of the workings of God.

Though the statement seems overly vague and presumptuous I think it useless to take issue with its accuracy since Professor Smith holds the statement to be incontrovertible. What I want to do is to reflect on how this statement shapes the theology

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Professor Smith proposes and to take serious issue with his conclusion that this theology is fitting for the academic study of religion. The statement "the world's religious history is the scene of God's relations with humankind, and of humanity's relations with God," is, by its theist subject one kind of theological statement. As I would understand it, to hold that a view, particularly a view of God, is incontrovertible, that is, beyond contest, beyond debate, beyond discussion, is to make a statement of faith. This is a conviction and surely not a statement of the results of empirical and historical research. Though statements of faith are not necessary as the base for a theology, it seems to me that Professor Smith is using this statement this way. Upon this statement he founds a particular theology of religious history. On the one hand, I want to remain open to the possibility that this might be legitimate and recognize it as an attempt to resolve that modern Christian theological issue of placing Christianity among the world's religions. But, on the other hand, I want to vigorously assert that this is not an endeavor appropriate to the academic study of religion, although I want to consider how theology might be appropriate to this study.

It is well known that many religious traditions have little difficulty subsuming other religious traditions. Jesus, for example, has been accepted as a prophet, a teacher, an avatar in a variety of non-Christian religions. Historically, Christianity has not taken this assimilative, or creatively reinterpetive, approach. It has preferred a different approach: to try to make everyone in the world Christian. Certainly, in the modern religiously plural world, one of the major tasks of Christian theology is to develop the creative assimilative reinterpetive approach to non-Christian traditions. The concerns of this Christian theology would be focused as much outside of the Christian tradition as within it. This Christian theology must resolve such issues as: who the Buddha is in Christian terms, how the Christian God works through Hindu ritual, what Christian elements are in an African rites of passage or a Melanesian crisis cult movement. Unless I am mistaken, this Christian theological endeavor has only been done in terms of Judaism and then only in the pre-Christian era. I believe that Professor Smith's proposition is for exactly this kind of theology, a Christian (or perhaps Western) theology that encompasses the whole of religious history. I frankly doubt that there will be much interest in this kind of Western theology, though I can imagine some merit in it. For one thing, it would demand an enormous knowledge of the history of religions. Professor Smith is a leader in this kind of theology and one of the few with the knowledge to attempt it. He describes that in his approach, he learns not only about but from many religious traditions, and he summarizes his results by saying "I personally...have learned from these sources much about God."

Still, I do not think this theological endeavor could accurately be described as academic precisely because it begins

and ends as a theology of religious history, that is, that religious history is the scene of God's relations with humanity. Since the view is incontrovertible, it cannot change, be debated, nor challenged by the task itself. This position precludes the academic, as I know it. Academic learning advances primarily through the process of holding up propositions for scrutiny and creative, playful, examination. If the propositions are not open to discussion and debate, if they cannot be revised, even overturned, then little learning is likely to occur. Such an approach would simply be a projection of our own views upon all that we study leaving us no measure of the fit.

But could theology be a proper concern of the academic study of religion? That of course depends on what one means by theology. In the uses of the term that retain the theistic dimensions, I seriously doubt that it can be appropriate to the academic study of religion, though it may itself be academic. The exception to this would be a descriptive or comparative study of theologies. Its development might proceed on some of the observations made by Professor Smith. Christians have theologies, so do Jews and Muslims, maybe even Hindus and Buddhists. Theologies are invariably associated with religion, however we understand that word. Therefore, it is appropriate to the academic study of religion to engage in the descriptive and comparative study of what we identify in these religions as theology. In such a study one could not begin with any incontrovertible positions on God, transcendence, revelation, faith, history, or even theology itself. This study must also be open to the likelihood that some, even many religions, may not have theologies at all. This should not diminish the importance of the endeavor. The results of this descriptive and comparative study of theology should be greater knowledge about religions, both those with and without theologies, as well as about theology as an important form of religious action. Many who study non-Christian traditions are presently engaged in this kind of study.

But, as I understand it this theist view of theology is not the only view. What of the appropriateness to the academic study of religion of those who retain the term "theology," yet do not hold a theistic core to this study, that is, who do not see themselves engaged somehow in what Professor Smith refers to as "telling the truth about God?" Though I am certain that my perspective is naive, for these students of theology I wonder about their motivations for retaining such a restrictive and emotionally laden term as "theology." I wonder why they do not simply call themselves students of religion.

As we enter this exciting new period in the study of religion, our efforts will be greatly enhanced by careful and attentive consideration of the bold programs set before us by the likes of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and our efforts will be nurtured and stimulated under the guidance of Jane Smith.

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