THEOLOGY AND THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION

Wilfred Cantwell Smith

We are entering an exciting new period of our history.

The world is in disarray. Western civilization is in crisis. I have even heard some Americans say that this country is in trouble. What is exciting is that we are aware of this. The world has in fact been out of joint for quite some time. Our civilization has been out of kilter for a good while. The difficulties of this nation are not brand new. What is stirring, what makes it engaging as one looks to the future, is the widespread recognition that changes are due--and on a significant scale. On all sides people are feeling that something different is in order; something new and better. The problem is not just to change the *status quo*: there is no *status quo* any more; only a *fluxus quo*. Our task then is to think through carefully what ongoing modifications would be best, and then to strive to push those modifications rather than some others that seem less promising.

Not far from the center of modern turmoil are questions of religion. It is not so long ago that intellectuals, in particular, supposed that religion was *passe*, that its remnants would soon evaporate. Even when conflicts erupted--and have persisted--in Northern Ireland, in Palestine, more recently in Iran and north India and Sri Lanka, various voices insisted that these were "not religious but political", "not religious but economic", "not religious but ethnic", or whatever, failing to recognize that this "either/or" mentality with which they were operating in saying such things was a form of cultural imperialism (secular imperialism), and a sheer failure to understand normal human beings. Religion is not separate from politics, economics, community membership; it infuses these, and is infused by them. The upsurge on this continent of the so-called "moral majority", in Israel of Kahane-type movements, in Iran of so-called fundamentalism, in India of extremism among Sikhs, in erstwhile serene

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Ceylon of communal violence, suggests that among Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists, a religious resurgence is under way; that humankind, far from being about to abandon the religious dimension of its history as has been proposed, is returning to it--with vehemence. And if forced to choose, fatefully, between religion and rational enlightenment, it may well choose religion. The conflicts that such resurgence produces, among diverse expressions of that dimension, and between each and rationalism, is clearly destructive, and threatens us all. For sensitive religious people, this "return to religion" poses moral and religious problems; including theological, intellectual, ones.

Indeed, there are major intellectual problems presented to us all in all of this. At one level there is the sheer understanding of what is going on, and of understanding more adequately our human selves, and our corporate selves, in a fashion that will make sense of this manifest concern. At a more constructive or pragmatic level, closely related, or ultimately identical, there is the intellectual task of thinking out theories that will enable us as human beings to develop that religious dimension of our life and our society without tearing each other apart in the process; and making clear that a choice between religion and enlightenment is a matter of false alternatives; of making sure that such a choice becomes manifestly false.

What is this religion business that plays so paramount a part in our lives here on earth? And how can we conceive it in ways that will recognize its diversity, while defusing that diversity's explosiveness?--and will recognize its profundity, while defusing that profundity's fanaticism?

As intellectuals, of course, we face the further--or preliminary--task of ensuring that our answers to these questions be coherent with everything else that we know about the universe. Fundamentally, the task is that our answers be true--the intellectual, *and* the religious, task.

I come thus to my announced topic: theology and the academic study of religion.

Here too there is excitement: the excitement of entering upon a new era of development--one that it will be your generation's task to work out well. Iliff School of Theology, and the University of Denver,are lucky to have a person like Jane Smith--but I shouldn't say that; there is no one quite *like* Jane Smith. This school and this university are lucky to have Jane Smith here, to join in playing a major part in this development. I shouldn't say *that*, either: you are not lucky, you are wise. You chose her, a person who can indeed play a highly significant, constructive, insightful, role in the great new phase of our culture's dealing with these issues.

The phase is new, as part of a continuing historical process. The recent situation has also been a phase: the situation in which theology on the one hand, and universities on the other, were perceived, and administered, as two distinct and indeed separate things. That phase is itself more recent than we often recognize. The first theological seminary on this continent was established in 1809. Harvard Divinity School, from which both Jane Smith and I come, followed in 1818, the first such separate divinity school. At the time, these represented a new phase, a striking innovation. Before then, Harvard was integrally a Christian institution. It had been set up, in 1636, in order to train ministers, and its first chair was the Hancock professorship of Hebrew. Many centuries before that, the universities of Europe were founded by the Church. And on this continent, most colleges were founded by Churches. What was afoot at the beginning of the last century was a new phase in the relation between theology and academe, one that is in our day coming to an end, about to be superseded by a still newer phase that it is our business to think through and your business to carry through. That new development has already begun, both here, I gather, with your joint doctoral programs, and in several significant places elsewhere--including also state universities, most of which now have begun to have Religion departments.

That intervening era, in which the two matters were separated, both in fact and in theory, was natural enough in the circumstances, was at the time probably necessary, and for a while was marked not only by divergence and alienation but presently by the overt conflict and bitterness of the science-religion controversy. Much has happened since, as everyone knows. Some things developed in the course of that period that have been less obvious, and deserve note as we move into and plan for the next. Let us look at a few of these developments on each side which by persisting uncriticized stand in the way of a newer outlook. Or we might better say, our failure to be aware of them could stand in the way of our dealing intelligently with the new challenges.

The most salient can perhaps be summed up in an anecdote. On occasion, when I have been asked if I really think it legitimate that theology be taught within a university, I have replied, "Why not? I have taught courses in Islamic theology in universities for thirty-five years;" and the response to this is, "Oh! But that is not what we mean." Embedded in that response is the nub of our problem, I suggest.

The assumption behind it is that of course I do not *believe* in Islamic theology, nor is there any danger that the students will; so that to teach it is all right. I am suggesting that this attitude illuminates both sides of our issue.

Let us take first the seminary side. In the course of the period under review--essentially, in the course of the 19th century--in the West "theology" became "Christian theology": a disastrous shift. Still today a lot of people simply take this for granted; when they say the one they mean or presume the other. Or at least, if they are (or have been) Christians they assume without further ado that the only theology to be taken seriously is the one that the Church has developed over the course of the centuries (--without too much thought given to the point that in fact it is not *one* theology that Christians, in the various and diverse Christian Churches, have developed over those diverse centuries and indeed continue to develop, but many). If pushed, into noting that Muslims and Hindus and some others have also reflected theologically, then they resort to a plural, "theologies," thinking of a series with Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Sri Vaishnava, etc. This is to reduce theology from a metaphysical aspiration to a sociological fact.

I am concerned here not primarily with the arbitrariness that selects out the historically Christian sector from such a series (although once the reduction has been made, then the seminary makes this choice, on principle, and academia on principle cannot make it). Rather, my concern is first with something more subtle--and much deeper. In discussions of the difference between Theology and the university's approach to "Religious Studies," or as I prefer to call it, The Study of Religion, a remark is sometimes heard to the effect that the difference is simple: to be in theology is to be close-minded, to be on the academic side is to be open-minded. What those who voice such a view presumably think of as a theologian is not someone endeavouring to ascertain what can be truly said about God, but someone who rather is defending or seeking to perpetuate what others in the past have said--specifically, others in his or her own particular community. It is alas historically, and dolefully, the case that there have been of late people like that; but it is gratuitous to think of them as theologians. Apologists, perhaps; pitiable, certainly. No significant Christian (or for that matter no Muslim, or other) theologian of any stature over preceding centuries has ever been of that type. Theologians of repute have been men or women of high intelligence who have struggled to express in prose the best understanding of the divine to which they could manage (or were given the grace) to rise, using the most promising data available to them and integrating those data sincerely with their own life experience and with whatever else they knew of the world. In the nineteenth century, Christendom's growing recognition that the Christian has been one among several human responses to God, or to transcendence, had as its first response a move to ghetto-ize its own understanding and to suppose its task to be to defend or to cherish that particularity. Thus in the nineteenth century theology became for the first time reduced to Christian theology; "Jewish theology" as a phrase emerges in Jewish writing in the

twentieth century; and theologies began for the first time to be thought of as the self-articulation of a particular community's awareness. This was a highly novel idea, and one that will not hold water once scrutinized. Unscrutinized, it has wrought great mischief.

As I have said, no major Christian or Muslim or Hindu thinker, classically, ever thought like that. Aquinas wrote a *Summa Theologiae*, not a *Summa Christianae Theologiae*, a phrase that would have seemed to him what it is to me: almost blasphemous. To think of what he wrote as a Christian theology is no more accurate than to see it as a thirteenth-century theology, or a Neoplatonist-Aristotelian one, or various other specific things. Yet he was not aiming at writing a thirteenth-century, or a scholastic, or a male, or a middle-aged, theology as self-consciously distinct from potential other kinds; he was aiming at telling the truth about God, as best he, a finite individual in a particular situation, could attain it. Our situation is different; but our task is the same. We too are finite, and our aspiration too cannot be more--nor theologically less--than to express in specific, finite terms as much of infinity as we are enabled to envision.

Classically, theologians, whether Christian or Muslim or whatever, have assimilated what they could from their religious heritage and from their own experience, and have integrated that intellectually with whatever else they knew of the world. I am simply saying that our heritage is larger than was theirs--the younger generation today is heir to the entire religious history of the world; and what else we know is today of course new--is much, much vaster, and in some ways different in kind.

At first, during our period, Christian spokesmen endeavoured to preserve their predecessors' theologies unmodified by new knowledge. For instance, they championed the thesis that their own tradition, internally--specifically, the Book of Genesis--must for Christians be the source for their view of the history of the past six thousand years (from 4004 B.C.) and God's relation to humanity at work there. Later they moved ahead from this, to incorporate the new understanding of history (and prehistory), and of God's role in it, into a theology continuous with yet significantly different from earlier specificities, going beyond them. Even after that difficult and painful transition was effected (and of course there are still some who have not turned that corner), others still championed a comparable thesis on the question of religious diversity. They held that theologies from their own past, internally, written before we knew about other religious communities' thought and piety, should be preserved on this point intact, rather than incorporating into an expanded vision the new awareness now available--and widespread outside the Church--of the planetary scope, and striking pluralism, of faith. At the present time, this corner

too is in process of beginning to be turned. Once again, theology is benefitting much.

Christian leaders of thought have come to recognize that all human knowledge is relevant to the theological enterprise. One illustration from among many is that the perhaps leading Jesuit seminary in this country moved twenty or so years ago from an idyllic rural setting to a new site in the midst of Manhattan in order to be near Columbia University.

Let us turn now to the academic side of our topic. We have already noted that not only was theology for many centuries the queen of the university sciences, but also in the seventeenth and for that matter into the eighteenth century academe was a religious milieu. The separation is a nineteenth century affair, persisting with dwindling force into this. I return to that comment that I proffered on the teaching of university courses on Islamic theology--to the effect that that does not really count; that academic purity is not threatened by it. Quietly presupposed here is the inherited disparagement of religious thought, with its assumption that of course no one would take it seriously--neither I as teacher nor potential students. The new situation is that in actuality I take classical Islamic thought very seriously indeed (so does Jane Smith), and Hindu and Buddhist and Jewish and the rest: not only in antiquarian or disinterested, so called "objective," fashion--though certainly they illuminate human history, including present-day history, richly--, but because I have in fact myself learned from them, and found that my students can and do learn a great deal not merely *about* but *from* them--can and do learn and have learnt from them about the universe, and about ourselves and our neighbours and about what it means to be human; about the significance of philosophy, and the role of logic in human thinking and the role of language in logic; and all sorts of things. And I personally, at least, have learned from these sources much about God. I used to say that I am an historian, not a theologian, but I no longer say that--even though I waited until my mid-sixties before writing a book with the word "theology" in the title. I am still an historian, but have come to realize that studying human history, and especially multicultural world history, is not merely an avenue, but perhaps in our day the primary, certainly the broadest, avenue, to theological adequacy. The world's religious history is the scene of God's relations with humankind, and of humanity's relations with God. This statement seems to me incontrovertible, whatever one thinks the word "God" refers to: from the ultimate transcendent reality that Christians and other theists adore, to a figment of the human imagination, as some atheists contend. And the world's religious history is in principle a university subject of study.

What is new is, as I have suggested, that that history is beginning to be taken seriously. Intellectuals can no longer

feel that it does not count, or that it is of only antiquarian interest.

"Ah, but you are forgetting revelation!", might earlier have been a riposte to the statement that I have proposed. No longer. For one thing, the concept of revelation is part of the world's religious history. An historian can trace its emergence and rise, its spread, its development, its many forms, its recent peregrinations, and its contemporary doldrums and re-invigorations--all this both within the Church and elsewhere. An historian can trace, too, the interrelations among Christian and other revelation concepts; interrelations rather subtly complex, it turns out. Beyond this, however, is a still more weighty fact: that apart from the concept of revelation, revelation itself, or revelations themselves, insofar as we use that term to interpret to ourselves what it conceptualizes, has or have occurred either within history or not at all. God has revealed Himself in history, or else He has not revealed Himself/Herself/Itself. If the Qur'an is the Word of God, it is the Word of God in human history. (Indeed, it is not by studying the Qur'an itself, but by studying religious history, that a non-Muslim comes to see that and how it has been so for Muslims; Christian and other theists could say, that and how it has served God as His Word; and skeptics, that and how this dimension of the human actually works in our lives.)

The question of revelation has become an historical question. More specifically, it has become a history-of-religion question. More generally, it has become an academic question--not in the disparaging sense of that word, but in its most central: the intellectual pursuit of truth.

Another objection raised against this view is to contend that certain types of Hindu, Buddhist, and Western mystic are not--this means, of course, have not been--interested in history. One hears such sentences as, "History is not important to him or her who experiences *satori*"--the Japanese term for Buddhist mystical Enlightenment. About such remarks, I proffer two comments. One: the *satori* experience itself takes place within history. Second: the statement about it is a short-hand way of saying that the range of history that interests such persons is exceptionally narrow; namely, perhaps only the moment during which the experience of *satori* occurs.

However you interpret the relation between time and eternity, both are related to human beings; we are related to both. Human history is the locus of their intersection. Human awareness of God, of the infinite, of the absolute, of truth, of the moral, human conceptions of the non-temporal, all take place within the flow of time. This is what religious history has been all about. However you interpret it, it has to be studied--and pondered.

Fundamentally what is happening in our day is that a former dichotomy, polarizing history and transcendence for a time, is being superseded. There is an historical dimension to even the most ecstatic religious life, and to the most revelational, most religious thinkers have begun to recognize. And there is a transcendent dimension to human life, academics are beginning to recognize--to all human life, and so far as we can see, there has always been, from palaeolithic times. Most human beings on earth have been aware of this, and have lived their lives less or more vividly, less or more effectively, in terms of it. Leading thinkers everywhere have articulated that awareness, in a vast variety of ways. A certain number, on the whole among the most intellectually brilliant, have done so theologically. It is quite evident, as we now look back over the array of these, that whoever has done so has done so in ways pertinent to a particular time and place; and presumably this is quite right and proper. Yet it is the case also that the greatest among them have done so in ways that have in fact, historically, proven enduring: various articulations have been preserved and cherished for many long centuries: not in unvarying static rigidity but rather with dynamic force--although each generation has had to decide, consciously or otherwise, whether to preserve and to extrapolate an earlier articulation or to come up with a new one of its own, less or more continuous with what went before although at some times more starkly innovative than at others.

Human history is the process of humankind's double involvement in a mundane and simultaneously a transcendent environment. Whether the two environments, or the two dimensions, are radically different, are discontinuous, or constitute an unbroken continuum, or are in fact identical but differently perceived, or are the same perceived with less or more insight--these are questions to which there have been, historically, varying answers; for that matter, varying answers within each separate tradition: for instance, within the Churches. It does not matter what answer you give to this question, so far as my present thesis is concerned: both the seminarian and the academic student of religion are engaged in the issue; and both are aware that until now answers have been diverse.

The crucial point is that within academia it is being increasingly recognized that we are leaving behind a certain phase in Western intellectual development in which a given set of answers to human questions had become established and virtually dogmatic. Certain early conclusions of Enlightenment rationalism had become accepted uncritically as final, with alternatives dismissed as not worth consideration. The present recognition is that, instead, our understanding of the human scene is by no means final, that secular orthodoxy is no more sacrosanct than any other rigid orthodoxy, and that it has once again become the task of intellectuals--specifically, of humanists--to think

through carefully and with considerable humility what human life and society are ultimately all about. Humanists have right along earned their bread and butter partly by questioning from time to time the entrenched orthodoxies of their day; and at the present moment the orthodoxy that is beginning to be questioned is the confident inherited assertion that there is no transcendence, that metaphysics and religion are bunk, that the almost universal human recognition is not allowed to be considered seriously that we human beings are in touch however remotely with a realm of value higher than ourselves.

Along with all those religious diverse theories on the relation of the mundane and the transcendent, this secular one takes its place, as one among the others, no more authoritative, and lately no less dogmatic.

Part of the current intellectual task, in the academic study of religion, is to enhance awareness of the transcendent dimension of human affairs by the modern rational mind, and critical appreciation. Since those dimensions are there, it has been an intellectual error not to see them. Students are beginning to realize that it is preposterous to imagine that anyone insensitive to the presence of what theists call "God" can understand or interpret human history in any but drastically inadequate ways, given the extent to which those human lives have been lived in that presence. Human beings, the historian now sees, have acted the way that they have acted, have been the persons that they have been, have constructed the societies in which they have lived, in the light of many other and finally less important, more mundane, matters; but also, most of them--though not all--quite consciously in the light of this. To fail to recognize the impingement of economic factors on human history would be obtuse. No less obtuse is to fail to recognize the simultaneous impingement of transcendence.

Some academics pontificate that even if there be transcendence, the university is not allowed to consider it. An historian of religion is amused to find this repetition of the old dogmatist's attempt to rule out heretics from establishment institutions. Rational inquiry is not so easily intimidated!

I am not contending that the time has come to fuse the study of theology, Christian or other, and the academic study of religion. Much more work is needed, on each side, and on both sides collaboratively, to lay the basis for integration in the future--to heal the split in the Western soul, and to overcome the split in Western civilization. Ours is the only civilization, incidentally, that has been consciously built on two distinct sources, Greece and Rome on the one hand, Palestine on the other--which is the ultimate basis of our odd Western polarity between something that we call "religion" and the rest of culture. The two components have been, over the centuries, at

times in harmony, at times juxtaposed, recently in conflict, never fully fused, though at times integrated in a larger and well functioning whole. Integrated they may again become.

If this happens, it will be done first intellectually. Indeed, it is one of the modern intellect's most crucial tasks. I do not say that this *will* happen. I close as I began: we cannot predict the future, but the old order is changing, and something new must be constructed. What I have delineated is not utopian; and I suggest that it would be to the advantage of all concerned--and in the interests of trust; and of God. In any case, we are moving. It is important--for us, and for our civilization--that that movement be carefully thought out, sensitively wrought, richly productive.

The prospects here for that care, sensitivity, richness, are markedly enhanced by Jane Smith's joining you in your endeavours. I congratulate both her and you.