

# G. B. SMITH'S RELIGION OF DEMOCRACY

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Albert Camus, in *The Rebel*, contends that Western culture should not be dated in reference to before and after the death of Christ but, rather, in reference to the French Revolution. On the one hand, the significance of the French Revolution is found in the involvement of the masses in determining the policy-directions for society. On the other hand, the significance also encompasses the dethroning of the traditional autocratic God and His replacement by the will of the people. A similar point is also made by Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of The Masses*. G. B. Smith would agree in spirit with these assessments. It is Smith's contention that two factors of the modern world have radically changed our human understanding and life-style. As indicated by Camus and Ortega, the rise of democracy and the radical expansion of the masses constitute the first factor. Just as important is the second factor, which expands the application of the scientific method into all facets of human experience. So that Christianity may be intelligible and dynamically relevant to the modern world, Smith calls for all Christian doctrines and practices to be changed, if necessary, in light of the demands of democratic society and the world-view made possible by the modern sciences. In the following comments we shall explore Smith's views concerning the relation of religion to democracy and scientific method. Then we shall consider the implications of these factors for altering Christian doctrine and practice. But first we shall introduce G. B. Smith and his place in The Chicago School.

## INTRODUCTION

Gerald Birney Smith joined The Divinity School faculty of The University of Chicago in 1900. For the first six years, his appointment was in Systematic Theology. From 1906 to 1913 he served as Associate Professor of Dogmatic Theology. In 1913 he became Professor of Christian Theology and served in that capacity until his death in 1929. Although his primary responsibility was in theology, he was also noted as a mathematician and musician. Smith's special concern was the relationship of Christian ethics to the modern world. Although he was fully a part of the general social gospel and pragmatic orientation of his peers in the early years at Chicago, Smith's theological and philosophical position was closest to that of G. B. Foster. Bernard E. Me-

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land, a later member of The Chicago School, was a student of Smith's and has many times indicated his indebtedness to him and Smith's concern for retaining a mystical emphasis in his democratic religion. Note should be made of Smith's having given the Nathaniel W. Taylor Lectures at Yale in 1912, called *Social Idealism and the Changing Theology*, and the Earle Lectures in Berkeley in 1920. Although Smith was noted as a teacher and writer, he also made a major contribution to the development of American religious thought as a journal editor, serving first as editor of the *American Journal of Theology* and then as the founding editor of *The Journal of Religion*.

#### VIEW OF RELIGION

Smith views Christianity, and all other religions, "as an attempt on man's part to enter into right relations with those forces which will enable him to realize the richest life in the world here and now."<sup>1</sup> The Christian tradition began with the focus on increasing richness of life here and now; but as the early Christian experiences became more harsh, a mood of pessimism began to permeate. On the one hand this pessimistic mood was expressed by the increasing tendency to conceive of God as a supernatural, autocratic deity who was remote from the struggles of individuals and groups. Salvation came to be expressed more and more in terms of an act of benevolent condescension on the part of God, with humans passively accepting what is provided from above. On the other hand, this mood was expressed in the doctrine of innate human depravity, which "required Christians to depreciate natural human activities."<sup>2</sup> The net result of this pessimism was to create an inadequate religion that brought about an increasing disunity between God and humans. An adequate religion is not to be found in the logical consistency of doctrines, but in whether the religion meets the pragmatic test of providing the satisfactory consequences. The satisfactory consequences of an adequate religion occur when religion enhances experiences "of vital unity with great forces in the environment."<sup>3</sup> Such a religion serves as the "the means of organizing and expressing precious experiences of aspiration, love, devotion, service."<sup>4</sup> Smith conceives of his task as assisting in re-directing and

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<sup>1</sup>G. B. Smith, *Current Christian Thinking*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), p. 143.

<sup>2</sup>G. B. Smith, "Religious Significance of Jesus's Humanity", *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 24, p. 203.

<sup>3</sup>G. B. Smith (ed.). *A Guide To The Study of the Christian Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916), p. 510.

<sup>4</sup>G. B. Smith, "The Reconstruction of Religious Loyalty", *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 2, p. 192.

correcting Christianity in terms of crucial factors in the modern world in order that it can once again become a satisfactory religion.

### DEMOCRACY

The function of religion consists of "trying to obtain from the invisible realm the aid necessary to secure the things most valued in that particular group or generation."<sup>5</sup> Since democracy is one of the most valued characteristics of the modern world, it is necessary for Christianity to adjust in order to be an adequate religion. The problem for traditional Christianity is that it is conceived of as an elitist religion based on a system of theological favoritism. Such favoritism is well expressed in the theological doctrine of unconditional election. From the point of view of autocracy, God cannot be reproached with injustice because he elected to save some while allowing others to go to eternal damnation. Luther attempted to provide some correction to Christianity in his contention that the authority of the priest is dependent upon the consent of the governed. Luther also contains elements of the democratic spirit in his doctrine of justification by faith, which "means that every person has an immediate access to the source of spiritual power and joy by the simple exercise of personal faith."<sup>6</sup> Yet Luther's theology is a failure for the modern person because it rests upon the doctrine of the innate sinfulness of humans. So long as Christianity is tied to an autocratic view of God with a system of doctrines consistent with such a view, it will remain an elitist religion inappropriate to be the guiding force for modern society. The root of the anti-elitist hostility "is found in the conviction that the Christian church is part and parcel of a system of special privileges which democracy is bound to demolish."<sup>7</sup> Smith attempts to delineate the characteristics of a democratic religion, as follows:

1. An autocratic religion cannot prepare citizens for a democracy . . .
2. A democratic religion must exist by human consent rather than by a claim of divine rights . . .
3. A democratic Christianity must look forward rather than backward. It must exalt a creative spirit rather than the demand for conformity . . .
4. The adoption of a democratic spirit in Christianity means the

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<sup>5</sup>G. B. Smith, "Democracy and Religious Experience", *Biblical World*, Vol. 53, p. 133.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup>G. B. Smith, "The Moral Meaning of Democracy", *Biblical World*, Vol. 53, p. 4.

development of intelligent citizenship rather than the inculcation of dogmatic propaganda.<sup>8</sup>

If Christianity is to become a democratic religion, the church and its clergy must function in appropriate ways. The clergy must stop preaching about a supernatural, autocratic God and should focus on the problems of a democratic society. The church should cease calling persons to direct their time, energy and money in trying to get to heaven and, rather, should re-direct these persons to ministering to the needs of people here and now. True worship in a democracy will enhance reverence for those human values which democracy makes supreme—such as justice, brotherhood, progress and enrichment of life. Smith contends that redirecting Christianity in terms of democracy fits within the democratic spirit of Jesus as displayed in his teachings concerning the brotherhood of all persons:

For the democracy of which we dream is nothing but human society made conscious of the divine sublimity of that picture of human brotherhood and justice which can be best realized as men become sharers of the life of Jesus. The evangelization of democracy and the democratizing of Christianity are two aspects of the same movement in which God is working out his purpose for this age.

#### SCIENTIFIC METHOD

The fundamental issue facing modern theology, if it is going to make the Christian faith intelligible in a democratic society, is whether it can discard the "inherited conception of Christianity as a perfect revelation of truth which abides substantially unchanged from age to age."<sup>10</sup> This has basically been the issue for religion since the impact of Copernicus. By the Nineteenth Century the issue was openly expressed in the struggle between Orthodoxy and Modernism and most clearly stated in the Encyclical letter of Pope Pius X against Modernism and in the *Programme of Modernism* put forth in reply.

The struggle focuses in the question "What is truth?" The Orthodox position replies with the traditional answer, "Truth is to be found in the content of authorized belief." The reply from the Modernist or more liberal orientation is that "Truth is determined in the light of careful, critical study, making primary use of historical tools." Smith

<sup>8</sup>G. B. Smith, "Christianity and Political Democracy", *Biblical World*, Vol. 53, p. 442-3.

<sup>9</sup>G. B. Smith, "The Task of the Church In A Democracy", *Biblical World*, Vol. 53, p. 639.

<sup>10</sup>G. B. Smith. *A Guide To The Study of the Christian Religion*, p. 486.

contends that the student of Christianity cannot serve these two orientations, for only the orientation to critical study will provide the satisfactory consequences required for an adequate religion in the modern world. One must reject the traditional approach of allowing his study to be determined by a preconceived theory, even if the theory has always been accepted as divinely revealed. Rather, one must attempt to take account of all the facts and let his conclusion be dictated by these facts. By following this critical approach, one will develop a stronger religious faith because it will be based on honestly facing the facts. The strength of this faith will also be great because it will incorporate the understanding that increased data will probably require a continuing process of change in the way one understands the Christian tradition and expresses one's Christian faith.

It is of fundamental importance that the student of theology should learn to feel the religious value of honestly facing the facts. The man who has taken this attitude of absolute loyalty to whatever proves itself to be true possesses a spiritual strength which can never be attained by one who is in constant dread lest "criticism" make inroads into his faith. It is only as one comes to feel that loyalty to the truth is more religious than mere conformity to a prescribed statement that the full value of critical methods will appear . . . Conclusions reached by historical inquiry may be revised or even abandoned without involving any sense of moral disloyalty to the old. One thus obtains a spiritual anchorage. Changes in religious convictions become possible without the period of moral disintegration engendered by the attempt to compromise with the dogmatic attitude.<sup>11</sup>

Smith contends that the scientific method should not only be applied to historically oriented critical study, but also should be applied to Christian living. Traditional theology has followed the deductive method. This approach begins with what is considered to be a revealed doctrine of God and plan of Salvation and then prescribes acceptable experiences of Christian living as a logical consequence of the dogmas of salvation. In light of the scientific approach, Smith would have theology begin with the inductive method. This approach requires first the examining of religious experience to discover the data for theological thinking that can determine satisfactory expressions of Christian living. If one applies the inductive method purely as a scientist, one will not be concerned to discuss the reality of the

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 491-2.

existence of God but will limit the consideration only to the idea of God and its psychological significance. An adequate religion requires that religious experience be set forth not as mere psychology but as theology. Therefore, the task of theology is to apply and interpret the scientific approach in such a way that persons feel the reality of the communion of the individual with God.

Smith contends that the task of theology is "the attempt to think over our religious inheritance in the light of present problems, so as to formulate for today and to transmit to the coming generation an expression of faith vitally related to our actual life."<sup>12</sup> Since our actual life is increasingly dominated by the scientific method and a world view which eliminates from our thinking the idea of supernatural intervention, an adequate expression of our Christian faith will have to be in terms of this scientific perspective. No longer will it be acceptable to "save the face" of theology by engaging in slight-of-hand tricks, such as the attempts to "harmonize" Genesis and geology. We must accept the reality that the medieval superiority of theology over all branches of learning is over. What is required today is a frank admission of the errors in Christian theology and a determined effort to be fair and truthful in re-developing Christian doctrines adequate for the actual living that confronts modern persons:

There is no better defense of any theory than to show that it rests on a full and accurate examination of the facts. It ought to be evident to everyone that knowledge of facts is constantly improving as humanity advances. We today know many things concerning which men were ignorant two thousand years ago. Instead of assuming at the start that a doctrine which was formulated in the past is absolutely true and has only to be defended against "attacks," we ought first to make sure of our facts. If this investigation results in the modification of the doctrine in question, it is far better to make the modification than to conjure up clever arguments which conceal the truth. If once we shall have come to the point of being willing to go wherever the facts lead, no matter what becomes our doctrines, we shall occupy a position far stronger than that of the popular "defense." Theology has so long been accustomed to rely on external authority that it is necessary to exercise particular care in order to meet modern questions in a way which will convince men accustomed to scientific exactness.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 543.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 544-5.

## DOCTRINES

In re-developing Christian doctrines in terms of criteria appropriate to the modern world, it is necessary in the Protestant traditions to establish the authority-role of the Bible. It has already been indicated that Smith strongly supports the use of historical critical tools in studying the biblical tradition. Such study should be undertaken from the frame of reference that there is no "absolute" truth. Humans live in a world which is unfinished and becoming, so the traditional view of a static revealed truth in the Bible must be corrected. What we must seek in the Bible are spiritual insights which will help us come into greater contact with the reality that confronts us. The test for evaluating the adequacy of the spiritual insights of the Bible is the pragmatic criterion: whether satisfactory ideals are being established.

The primary aim of the biblical story is like the aim of a fable—to present in pictorial form some spiritual truth so that through the power of vivid imagery it shall arouse the inner life of the reader . . . Questions of historical accuracy should be subsidiary to this main purpose . . . truthfulness, then, in the realm of spiritual life, will consist in a constant determination to place the right *ideals* before children rather than in the attempt to secure correct *ideas*.<sup>14</sup>

Our discussion of the scientific method noted Smith's belief that we are to begin with our religious experiences and from examining these to discover the data for theological thinking. He would have us follow this inductive approach in establishing a new doctrine of God:

A more promising method of approach seems to me to be the frank recognition of the fact that our religious relationship to what we worship in our cosmic environment must be empirically studied, and our conception of God must be formulated in tentative terms which grow out of that experience, rather than in terms of an a priori philosophy assuming to be final."<sup>15</sup>

The old conception of God has been expressed in different ways, all of which are currently inadequate. On the one hand, God has been presented as an autocratic, super-natural monarch. As indicated previously, this view is rejected from a democratic perspective. On the other hand, God is conceived of as a heavenly Father. This view is

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<sup>14</sup>G. B. Smith, "Truthfulness In Teaching The Truth", *Biblical World*, Vol. 28, p. 238.

<sup>15</sup>G. B. Smith, "Is Theism Essential To Religion?", *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 5, p. 337.

rejected because "Fatherliness on the part of God is not an adequate starting-point in the presence of the desperate moral issues of which we are part and parcel."<sup>16</sup>

Having rejected the more traditional conceptions of God, Smith is careful to point out that "we have not yet satisfactorily reconstructed the doctrine of God to meet the moral demands of our age."<sup>17</sup> Yet, there are definite characteristics necessary in this new doctrine of God. One characteristic must be of a God that suffers: "A suffering God, bearing the burden of the evil in his world—this must be the conception of the coming theology . . . Evil costs something to God himself."<sup>18</sup> Another necessary characteristic is a God that hates sin, for "Unless God can be felt to *hate* sin which humanity hates, men will turn to the social agitator rather than to the Christian church."<sup>19</sup> In general, Smith conceives of an immanent God that is creatively involved in trying to solve the social, evolutionary problems of humanity.

We are living in an unfinished world, the best is yet to be. If this be true, then the relation of God to this development must be conceived in terms of unceasing moral creativity. The finishing of an unfinished world is a task of God no less than for man.<sup>20</sup>

Since a new doctrine of God is necessary, it is appropriate to question whether we shall also require a new view of Jesus Christ. Smith's answer is a qualified "yes", as he contends that "historical analysis shows that the interpretations of Jesus which we have either in ancient or in modern times are expressions of faith, in which the believer attributes to Jesus those traits which are deemed by him to be essential to salvation."<sup>21</sup> In our democratic age of complex social problems we are interested in the spiritual ideals for which Jesus stands rather than in his "person." The traditional emphasis on the divine person of Jesus is inadequate today because it interprets "his character in terms of a supernaturalism which separates him from humanity."<sup>22</sup> What is required is a view of Jesus that is related to contemporary human experience, for Smith contends that "the divinity of Jesus is best asserted by an unqualified belief in his completely human expe-

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<sup>16</sup>G. B. Smith. *Atonement*. (with J. M. P. Smith and E. D. Burton. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), p. 307.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>20</sup>G. B. Smith, "Religious Significance of Jesus' Humanity", p. 207.

<sup>21</sup>G. B. Smith, "The Christ of Faith and The Jesus of History", *American Journal of Theology*, Vol. 18, p. 538.

<sup>22</sup>G. B. Smith, *A Guide To The Study of the Christian Religion*, p. 529.



rience."<sup>23</sup> In essence, the power of Jesus is dependent upon his role as an inspiration to stimulate and to develop moral idealism—an idealism based on the genuine moral and social human achievements accomplished by Jesus. In our increasingly interdependent world, adequate stimulation is possible only as Jesus is conceived as a citizen of the world, persuasively devoting himself to the moral task of increasing human rights and shaping human efforts to the making of a more just social order. The new Christology fits with the new doctrine of God, for both give emphasis to an unceasing moral creativity giving direction to the completion of an unfinished social world.

It is only as Jesus can be shown to have made the most complete identification of himself with the moral rights of humanity that he can be the redeemer of men . . . But if the world shall come to believe that in Jesus we have the most perfect expression of that ideal toward which humanity yearns, if we can feel that he took upon himself without evasion the burden of the moral strife, and was faithful to the ideal even at the cost of crucifixion, then we can believe that Jesus is the incarnation of the immanent God who is sharing with men the burden of evil. And to know that Jesus, the perfect expression of the moral will of the immanent God, was crucified because he would not be false to the divine purpose means that the cross becomes the eternal symbol of identification with God.<sup>24</sup>

Smith's new doctrine of God also requires a change concerning the traditional view of sin, atonement and salvation. In the traditional view, sin is conceived of as an "original" condition of alienation on the part of all humans from God. Smith contends that "it is impossible for men today either to repent of Adamic sin or to regard death as a penalty for sin."<sup>25</sup> A more adequate view of sin must be tied to the increasing social consciousness of the modern age, which despairs of a *Laissezfaire* policy regarding the ills of humanity: "It is coming to be seen that the gravest sins of our time are due to willingness to use men impersonally, to regard human activities as a commodity to be traded with like other commodities."<sup>26</sup> Atonement and salvation are not effected through Jesus paying a price to God in order to do away with original sin. Rather atonement and salvation occur by an overcoming of the sin by which humans remain aloof from the welfare of

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<sup>23</sup>G. B. Smith, "Religious Significance of Jesus' Humanity, p. 207.

<sup>24</sup>G. B. Smith. *Atonement*. p. 315.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>26</sup>G. B. Smith, "Religious Significance of Jesus' Humanity", p. 194.

fellow-humans in need. "Salvation can only come through the overcoming of this aloofness. But when this is overcome, the individual is democratized."<sup>27</sup>

In the beginning of our remarks, we indicated that Smith calls for a re-working of Christian doctrine in terms of criteria relevant to the modern world. One criterion is an expanded application of the scientific method, often expressed in pragmatic terms. A second criterion is the demand of democratic society. Smith's new conception of God and how God relates to humans clearly indicates this pragmatic orientation and overriding concern with a democratic perspective:

If God is not separate from humanity, if he is actually bearing the burden of the evil done to his children, then atonement made to an outraged humanity is atonement made to God . . . The only satisfaction with which democracy can be content is that the man who has been anti-social, who has selfishly wronged others for his own profit, shall actually share and approve the social consciousness which condemns him for his wrong. Mere external punishment does not reach to the root of the matter. Democracy demands conversion—a change of heart—as the supreme atonement for the sins of the past. And if this takes place, democracy is willing, nay glad to take upon itself the consequences of the wrong, to endure the pains resulting from past evils in order to set free the converted soul to devote its energies to the social welfare.<sup>28</sup>

### ETHICS

If we had to designate one area of concern as the guiding focus for G. B. Smith, it would be ethics. His overriding concern is how to make Christianity the dynamic, directing force healing the social ills of humanity. Understanding that the modern world is increasingly under the influence of democratic principles and a scientific-industrial orientation, Smith looks to the New Testament for possible ethical guidance. He finds the New Testament ethic dominated by two limiting factors. On the one hand, the people are more concerned about the criteria for righteousness in terms of the coming Kingdom than with establishing what ought to be done to make this world a better place in which to live. On the other hand, the ethics of the New Testament functions on the simple level of personal relationships rather than being involved in any serious entanglement with the social and industrial problems of existing society: "The New Testa-

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<sup>27</sup>G. B. Smith. "Christianity and Political Democracy", p. 637.

<sup>28</sup>G. B. Smith. *Atonement*. p. 313-4.

ment thus lacks interest in social evolution which is an essential of modern ethical thinking."<sup>29</sup>

Special consideration is also given to the Catholic and Protestant traditions in ethics. The problem with both is that they rest their ethical foundation upon a supernatural source, following the deductive method for relating the ethical principles by which humans live. For the Catholics, the church is the divinely appointed agent of God charged with guiding human inquiries and deciding what conclusions are in accordance with God's will. Unfortunately the Reformation occurred before humans had come to realize the possibilities of empirical inquiry, with the result being that Protestants applied the deductive method to the revealed law in the scriptures. Although Jesus did stress the universal ethical principles of love, justice, brotherhood, and ministering to the needs of the disenfranchised, his principles were encased in a world view that is at best difficult for modern persons to understand and relate to their living situations.

The guiding principle for Smith's ethic is the inductive method. What we must do is start with human experience, attempting to discover human needs and appropriate actions related to these needs: "Ethical precepts thus are made relative to human needs instead of being referred to any superhuman or pre-human source."<sup>30</sup> Rejecting the view of innate human sinfulness, focus should be given in ethics to modern insights into human nature. Basically we have learned that through education and other methods of guidance, human conduct can be shaped. In other words, human nature is plastic and can be molded: "Christian ethics should take account of the factors which enter into the remaking of human nature, and should set forth the duty of using all proper means for the securing of a Christian character."<sup>31</sup>

In essence, Smith's ethic is part of his overall view of Christianity being adapted to the modern world. He finds God's will in the actual appeal of the facts of human experience rather than in a prescribed code or revealed tradition. Modern religious thinking draws its inspiration from the world in which we live. Therefore, "Christian ethics must learn to determine its content by a careful study of the problems which confront us and an understanding of the resources with which we may attain moral results. Christian ethics should be defined as the determination of the duties of a modern Christian living in the modern

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<sup>29</sup>G. B. Smith. *A Guide To The Study of the Christian Religion*, p. 562.

<sup>30</sup>G. B. Smith. *Social Idealism And The Changing Theology*. (New York: Macmillan, 1913), p. 89.

<sup>31</sup>G. B. Smith. *Principles of Christian Living*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924), p. 70.

world. To define it in terms of an ethical system belonging to another age is to fail to make Christianity completely ethical."<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In many ways Gerald Birney Smith is a Janus figure in American religious thought. He is very much a part of the Modernist and Social Gospel tradition. Harvey Arnold describes his contribution in this area as "one of the first and original statements of the modernist program to democratize God and theology. G. B. Smith was a pioneer way-shower."<sup>33</sup> Smith democratized doctrines and scripture, bringing them down from their exalted status to a pragmatic level for common, practical use. Some might call his efforts destructive, but the simple fact is that he helped make the Bible and the Christian understanding a spiritual force for many in facing human social ills.

Smith's Janus role is depicted in his clear assertion of an empirical theology. He was an honest and tough-minded scholar in his attempt to apply the scientific method to the Christian tradition and religious experience. There was no room in his approach for the "accommodation" slight-of-hand theology presented by many liberals when confronted with miracles or the theory of evolution. Since the modern world has rejected the security provided by a supernaturally revealed religion, Smith's modern religion offered security in the empirical approach. The scientific approach in religion "preserves one from panic, because of the belief that critical examination of facts and revision of theory are normal ways of making progress."<sup>34</sup> G. B. Smith realized that his democratized and scientifically oriented Christian religion would also have the effect of making the faith more secularized, but he rightly contended that this was a risk that had to be taken if the Christian faith is to be intelligible and relevant to the modern person.

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<sup>32</sup>G. B. Smith. *A Guide To The Study of the Christian Religion*, p. 570.

<sup>33</sup>C. H. Arnold. *God Before You and Behind You*. (Chicago: The Hyde Park Union Church, 1974), p. 165.

<sup>34</sup>G. B. Smith. *Social Idealism And The Changing Theology*, p. 188.

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