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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF
RELIGIOUS TRUTH IN WILFRED C. SMITH

W ILFRED CANTWELL SMITH was one of the twentieth century's finest historians in the field of the comparative study of religion. One is struck by the convergence of several features in Smith's writings: the extraordinary depth of his linguistic and historical learning; the breadth of his scholarly pursuits as a comparativist; the zest with which he engaged the philosophers, the theologians, and even the scientists; and finally, his passion as a writer who was convinced that we live at a time of great peril and promise—and that the study of the religious traditions lies at the center of this critical turning point in our worldwide web of cultures and religions.

My task here is to offer a critical examination of Cantwell Smith's position as exponent of a religious pluralism—and, especially, of his understanding of religious truth in our radically pluralistic situation today. In this task, I will proceed first by briefly describing what constitutes a position of religious pluralism. I will then describe, as succinctly as I am able, features that are distinctive of Smith's pluralistic position. And this will include, necessarily, some attention to his central concepts of religion, cumulative traditions, faith, transcendence, and truth as personal. I will then offer my own critical reflections on some of these concepts as they bear on the question of religious truth.

First, what is a pluralist religious position? It may help to define it in terms of what it is not. It is generally recognized that religions make factual claims: Therevada Buddhists teach that there is no enduring self—the *anatta* doctrine; Muslims hold that Muhammad is the "seal" of the prophets; Christians assert that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Some religions, e.g., various traditional forms of Christianity, teach that their religion possesses the final, essential truth and way to salvation. The Christian exclusivists quote, e.g., the words purported to be those of the Apostle Peter in Acts 4:12—"And there is salvation in *no one else* (than Christ), for there is no other name under heaven given among men *by which we must be saved*." (italics added)

Now pluralists, such as Smith, deny this kind of exclusivist claim. He and other pluralists hold that the various religions are necessarily shaped by their distinctive historical-cultural contexts, and that each one can hold an authentic but, nonetheless, imperfect conception of God or Ultimate Reality. There are, then, various paths to spiritual truth, liberation, or salvation. Smith, however, proceeds beyond these common pluralist convictions to develop his own distinctive position. I can best elucidate Smith's view by referring to those concepts mentioned earlier. They all relate, directly or indirectly, to his views on religious truth.

In his now famous book, *The Meaning and End of Religion* Smith traces the development of the concept of religion and he demonstrates that it is a rather recent Western word used to describe, with considerable abstraction, traditions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc., as mutually exclusive systems of belief. This has proved costly, since it depicts these "religions" as standing over against one another as conflicting ideological or doctrinal claims to truth. In Smith's estimation, this has had the ruinous effect of stopping inter-faith dialogue in its tracks.

What we have come to call religions are in fact, what Smith calls "cumulative traditions." Like cultures, these "cumulative traditions" are vast, complex, protean, multiform, and ever-developing and changing processes. Such entities (if we can call them that) as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity are not single, static, reified "religions," for they take on quite diverse forms, concepts, expressions, in different geographical places and in different historical periods. With regard to the question of their truth, Smith would say that it is as odd to speak of these "cumulative traditions" as true or false as it would be to speak of a great civilization as true or false.

What Smith finds distinctive of all these spiritual traditions, indeed, their heart and soul, is what he calls faith. Faith is a crucial concept for Smith—the common feature of all religions—and integrally related to his understanding of truth. Faith, for Smith, is a quality of the human person, evident in all human life since paleolithic times. The distinctive quality of this faith is seen in the uniquely human need to apprehend and know in a *personally committed way*. Faith is, then, an individual's engagement with, and participation in, a form of life. Smith says that it is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbor, to the universe; a "total response … to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension"[2]

These personal expressions of faith are the primary, or first-order, forms of

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[2] Wilfred Cantwell, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

religious discourse. And while faith is universally the same in this phenomenological sense, religious-cultural cumulative traditions are multiform and varied, as are religious beliefs. Now, such beliefs, while necessary, are nonetheless a second-order dimension of faith. When beliefs are thought to be primary, they give rise to differences, misunderstandings, suspicions, and conflicts that characterize our religious life in the present day. As Smith writes: "A devout person, whose sense of the presence of God is both vivid and sincere … may plead for God's mercy and humbly know the quiet transport of its assurance because of his personal and living faith that God is indeed merciful. At that moment the truth of that man's religiousness is perhaps a different matter from the question of the earthly path by which he arrived at his awareness of his faith, or of the community of which he is a member."[3] It is clear that for Smith religious truth has, then, to do with the interiorizing and living out a form of life: The Muslim's personal interiorizing of the teachings of the *Qur'an* or the Buddhist's personal, sincere appropriation of the Buddha's *Dharma*. And their truth is confirmed in the liberating or saving efficacy of this act of faith. And so, Smith contends, it is wrong to ask whether the various multiform, cumulative traditions are true. Truth does not reside in religions but in persons—in the faithfulness and integrity of persons. Smith writes: "It is dangerous and impious to suppose that Christianity [or Buddhism or Islam, etc.] is true, as … something "out there" impersonally subsisting … Christianity is not true absolutely, impersonally, statically; rather it can *become* true, if and as you or I appropriate it to ourselves and interiorize it, in so far as we live it out from day to day."[4] Smith considers it quite wrong, then, to think of the world religions in terms of their competing "truth-claims." These "cumulative traditions" should be viewed, rather, as "divergent paths." They are ways, or proven means that are, necessarily, different. It follows, Smith argues, that *all* human religious constructs—be they words or rituals, doctrines or images—are necessary *means* to direct individuals toward the transcendent. However, as finite means they also are dangerous because they can be given an ultimate and absolute meaning and value. Every such human claim to an *ultimate* or *absolute* knowledge of God is idolatrous because it is knowledge mediated through some finite human construct. And so, it follows that the Christian or Muslim is dangerously idolatrous when either claims that his or her religion possesses the ultimate or final truth about God and salvation.

Before I turn to raise some questions about the adequacy of Smith's position, I need also to refer briefly to one other term, namely, Smith's use of the concept of the transcendent. In all of his discussions of faith, Smith understands the orientation of personal faith as constituting a sense of being in the presence of

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[3] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (New YorkL Scribners, 1967), 70-1.
[4] *Questions of Religious Truth,* 68.

what he calls "a transcendent dimension".[5] Because of his strictures concerning idolatry, Smith is wary of saying anything ostensive or direct about the "transcendent," although he often—and revealingly—uses the locution God. Smith's conception of the transcendent is important, as you will see, in relation to the other concepts, that is, faith, belief, and truth.

How are we to respond to Smith's theology of religions as it relates to this question of religious truth? My basic concern is that, in his interpretation of faith, and therefore, of truth, he does not give serious enough attention to the cognitive, conceptual, or ideational dimensions of religion even in its primal or archaic forms. He minimizes the formative role of cognition in shaping distinctive religious frameworks, or world-views, or moral forms of life. And these often unreflective cognitions do represent quite different visions of human life and Ultimate Reality. I would contend that every religious practice, every ritual, every myth presupposes religious cognitions even if these appear to be subconscious and inarticulate. The various elements that make up a group's form of life are, of course, acquired socially from the group. But they constitute a system of stories or myths, of rituals, and of moral behaviors that presuppose meaningful cognitions: for the Jew the story of the Covenant at Sinai; for the Buddhist the depiction of the Paranirvana of the Buddha. Smith rightfully makes much of the active, performative character of religious traditions, including Christianity. In a lengthy discourse on Baptism he offers it in support of this point. Yet one observes that this discussion of Baptism is chock full of distinctly Christian concepts—beliefs, if you will. One has to ask: what was the primitive Christian catechism all about? Or, what was in the mind of the Buddhist novice when pledging his allegiance to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha?[6]

I want now to develop this general critique more specifically with reference to Smith's notion of faith, transcendence, and truth. First with regard to faith. Smith is absolutely correct to emphasize the central role, in the West, of the biblical-Augustinian act of faith as a holistic engagement of a person's mind, will, and affections which result in a person's apprehension, insight, trust, and loyalty. But two questions arise: 1) First, is Smith correct when he says that faith is a central feature of the Hindu, Greek, and Buddhist traditions?[7] Are there not important South and East Asian religious traditions in which faith, as Smith describes it, is not at all central, if it even exists? And therefore does not Smith's stress on faith favor the Semitic traditions and distort those traditions that center on meditation and insight?[8] 2) Second, Smith does acknowledge that faith has an intellectual

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[5] *Faith and Belief,* 12.

[6] *Faith and Belief,* 71ff.

[7] *Faith and Belief,* 140.

[8] Many critics have touched this point. See, e.g., John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Meaning of Pluralism for Christian Self-Understanding" in *Religious Pluralism*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame: University of

dimension; he calls it belief.[9] He also recognizes that faith and belief are related, although faith is primary and belief is secondary and, in some cases, it would appear inessential. But then Smith proceeds to qualify this a good deal and to confuse the relationship. He says that faith issues in insight and true knowledge.[10] He says that it is fundamental that faith (whether Jewish, Muslim, and so forth) be continuous with the tradition's earlier forms, but that a "disastrous … and monumental error [is made] of seeking similarity of belief … rather than similarity of faith"[11] But, one must ask: what are those "earlier forms"? They are sacred rites, etiological myths and legends, codified behaviors, written scriptures and commentaries.

Yet Smith says that while the universal quality of faith has been expressed in, elicited, nurtured and shaped by, the religious traditions of the world, these "leave *faith* unspecified." Faith appears, then, to be a purely generic quality that produces human personal insight. But, of course, it cannot be a blank, unspecified faith that all religions share. It is *always* specific, a faith as "engendered and nurtured" by a tradition, be it tradition X, Y, or Z. To put it another way, faith is "faith in …" Faith has a specified realistic object even if its form is not wholly adequate. In the West, the word faith has, helpfully, been distinguished as *fides qua creditur*, the subjective act, the "faithing" of the believer as an act of trust (*fiducia*) and loyalty. But faith also includes the *fides quae creditur*, the mental assent or belief in the reality or truth inherent in the object of trust and loyalty. Faith and belief are thus bound together. Subjective faith unspecified is simply empty, while the object of faith, without the subjective act of internalization, may be real but purely notional.

This same line of argument is relevant, I believe, with regard to Smith's use of the word "transcendent." He uses the words "the transcendent" to refer to what the various traditions understand as the object of faith. But it, too, remains unspecified by Smith so as not to prejudge the matter. And because it is *faith* that is universally shared and the primary focus of religion, he gives the impression that the quiddity or essential nature of the object of faith, i.e., the transcendent, or Ultimate Reality can be regarded, perhaps, as inconsequential and, at the same time, basically one and the same. In either case, he is open to a legitimate query. Since he uses this neutral, unspecified word for the object or end of personal faith, but so frequently uses the word God when referring to the transcendent, he

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Notre Dame Press, 1984), 161-79; and "Christian Witness in a Plural World," in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. John Hick and Hasan Askari (Hants, England: Gower Publishing Company, 1985), 144-62; and, "Beyond 'Pluralism,'" in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992), 81-95. Also see John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 29.

[9] *Faith and Belief,* 196.
[10] *Faith and Belief,* 160f.
[11] *Faith and Belief,* 166.

gives the further impression that, unawares, he is imposing a Western personalistic and monotheistic conception on that which others point to as "the transcendent" or Ultimate Reality. But the transcendent, many would insist, is not the same ontological or metaphysical reality as it is understood by the various religious traditions. Emptiness for Buddhists and God for Christians do not denote the same thing, and both imply other beliefs that also are different, indeed, are incompatible. Now, Smith often responds that metaphysical or theological statements made by ordinary believers "are not primarily claims," they are, rather, instances of "bearing-witness".[12] But bearing witness to what? In his Muslim instance, Smith answers: "to 'truth'"—namely, "that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is His prophet." Now, when offering this confession, the ordinary Muslim may not *fully* understand what the word God means, or he or she may even have a grossly distorted conception of it, but there are certain statements being made here that are within a specified range of understood realistic meanings. The untutored Muslim is not "bearing-witness" to something wholly unspecified.

I will now conclude with some summary comments about Smith's understanding of religious truth. You will recall that, according to Smith, religious truth resides in the quality of a person's faith, not in something "'out there' impersonally subsisting." He writes: "It is not statements that are true or false but the use of them by individuals".[13] The word "use" here indicates how thoroughly Smith defends a voluntaristic notion of truth. He says: Personal, sincere truth entails recovering it, appropriating it, affirming it, and actualizing it.[14] Truth thus means truth for you, truth for me, since genuine faith always takes shape in particular situations of time and place; "No two Hindus," Smith writes, "have the same faith, no two Christians".[15] What are we to make of this? What does this view of truth imply? First, Smith appears to be saying that personal faith need not have any commonly shared realist, cognitive content. But this implies, for one thing, that salvific truth is present not only in all religious traditions, but in every sincere person of faith. But how does one measure sincerity? What about the piously sincere but deluded fanatic? Or are there measures or degrees of sincere faith? Are there moral or other norms to be applied? But if so, are we not imposing some objective standards?

Smith often appears to assert that truth and salvation or liberation are present in all religious traditions where sincere acts of faith are empirically present. In his most thorough discussion of these matters in *Faith and Belief* , Smith does make it

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[12] Wilfred Cantwell, Smith, "Conflicting Truth-Claims: A Rejoinder," in John Hick (ed.), *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 158.
[13] "A Human View of Truth," 99.
[14] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "A Human View of Truth," in John W. Burbige, *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 107.
[15] *Faith and Belief,* 132.

clear that, while they are secondary, ideas or beliefs "are to be not only appreciated, but held responsibly." He proposes, however, that such beliefs or claims should be understood not as "true" or "false" but, rather, as "one's own" and "other people's." There is a moral [and an epistemological?] difference between "I believe" and "they believe." And, in any dialogue, two imperatives must be assumed: "Of one's own affirmations … it is absolutely imperative that they be true." Of others' it is absolutely imperative that they be understood.[16] Smith then proceeds to suggest that if these imperatives are followed as the first step in dialogue, they can lead toward what he calls "coherence," i.e., "toward a reuniting the two." Potentially, then, we constitute "a corporate global community … pledged through our several disparate loyalties to truth and our mutual respect for each other, to move severally and jointly closer to that truth"[17]. But a few lines later, he contends that one individual's or one group's apprehension or conceptualization (i.e., belief) "may be good or bad," "may be less or more partial." "Each world-view [system of affirmations] may be less or more adequate to comprehending reality in general." Nor can all world-views "effectively claim our attention and active respect.[18] Obviously, there are, in the sentences just quoted, normative judgments about beliefs suggested by Smith. In the conclusion to *Faith and Belief*, Smith further concedes that ideas "cannot be set aside, to let faith wallow innovatingly in sentimental a-rationality. It belongs to faith … to move intellectually *upwards not downwards* from the past." He continues (and attend here to his uses of evaluative words, especially regarding truth and reality): while "never more than mundane conceptualizations," religious truths "are at their *best* never less than important clues to a reality that others have known, and that we may know"[19]. He continues: the intellectual dimension of faith is "insight into reality"; and "its conceptualization (the 'belief' that goes with it) must … be sincere subjectively … and on the other hand be *valid* … not only in the objective sense of being a significantly *close approximation* to Reality, to final Truth, but also in the dynamic and demanding sense (thus linking the subjective and the objective) of the *closest approximation possible*".[20] Here Smith is rightly distinguishing the two necessarily correlative aspects of faith. He clearly senses the importance of affirming such an ontological and epistemological realism. But he does not carefully develop the theme, due, I believe, to tenaciously held claims with regard to the personal nature of faith and truth. As a result, Smith ends up, paradoxically, asserting that both faith (*fides qua creditur*) and true belief (*fides quae creditur*) are unspecified (empty) and essentially and universally one. I emphasize the word "essentially" because, ironically, the historian Smith, so forthright and determined in his dedication to the particularity and complexity of the "cumulative traditions," ends up

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[16] *Faith and Belief*, 155.
[17] *Faith and Belief*, 156.
[18] *Faith and Belief*, 157.
[19] *Faith and Belief*, 167.
[20] *Faith and Belief*, 169, italics added.

espousing a form of idealist essentialism and undercutting a genuine pluralism.[21]

My argument is that Smith's theology of religions sits uneasily with his historical commitment to particularity and difference. His use of religious language strikes me as not coherent. His theology requires a more intelligible epistemological realism.

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[21] See Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 79.
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