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Faith, Tradition, and Transcendence: A Study of Wilfred Cantwell Smith

I. Preliminary: The Problem and Its Context

1. THE PROBLEM

It is gratifying to encounter among scholars a growing consensus regarding the importance of the work of Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith, not only as an Islamicist but, more recently, as a theoretician about the aims and methods of the comparative study of religion.¹ This latter role is explicitly adopted in his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.² A recent brief note (pleading for the development of a specific method of religious criticism), in which frequent use is made of Smith's concepts of personal faith and cumulative tradition, without acknowledgment, may indicate that Smith has been paid the supreme compliment of having the conceptual scheme formulated in that book accepted as common coin in that academic discipline which interprets man's religiousness.³

The purpose of this paper is, first of all, to explicate the meaning of Smith's concept of personal faith and, secondly, by way of appraisal, to raise some terminological questions respecting the scope and content of his concept of 'faith.' The deficiencies in this endeavour are occasioned not only by the writer's inadequacies and the inherent mystery of personal faith, but also by Smith's deliberate evasion at this point. Smith, of course, is not unaware of this omission of detail. He concedes that the last word is far from having been spoken – that in *The Meaning and End of Religion* he had only set forth, by way of prolegomenon, the conceptual framework within which the inquiry into the meaning of faith may be most adequately conducted. He writes:

We have not answered, then, the query 'What is faith?' beyond asserting that the term refers to a personal quality of human life and history, and indicating an empirical procedure by which, through disciplined investigation, it should be possible over the years to give a progressively more adequate and accurate answer as to what is, what has been, the particular faith of particular persons (p. 189).⁴

We shall, nevertheless, address ourselves in this paper to the task of attaining

1. Smith was appointed Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, at its inception in 1952. In 1964 he became Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University.

2. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

3. Cf. Edmund Perry, 'Faith, Scholarship, and Criticism,' *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 34 (1966), 47f.

4. All page references in the text are to Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

as clear an understanding of Smith's idea of personal faith and its correlatives as these restricting circumstances permit.

2. SMITH'S PROPOSAL

A preliminary word must be written, however, about Smith's programme in *The Meaning and End of Religion*. It is his thesis that the concepts 'religion' and 'the religions,' which have acquired such prominence in the West as intellectual devices for interpreting religious experience, are in fact gravely unsatisfactory both to the objective historian of religion and to the *engagé* man of faith. These concepts, he maintains, are the result of a relatively recent Western process of reification, in which the dynamic and living historical and personal elements have been abstracted from the reality of religious experience, leaving a static entity which is thereupon conceived as its essence.

The concepts 'religion,' 'the religions,' and religions specifically named (Christianity, Buddhism, etc.) are inadequate for the detached scholar for two reasons. First, they inherently evacuate the tradition which they study of its transcendent reference, thereby distorting the historical significance of the reality which they seek to understand. The importance of a religious tradition to the participant is that, through it, he is enabled to see his life in a different way; the opportunities and crises, the decisions and deeds of life receive a transcendent reference and a salvific significance. Any conceptual apparatus which fails to take into account this living sense of the transcendent, with which the religious tradition suffuses existence for the faithful, defaults its candidature for enduring academic utility. On this point Smith writes: 'The observer's concept of a religion is by definition constituted of what can be observed. Yet the whole pith and substance of religious life lies in its relation to what cannot be observed' (p. 136). And again: 'The concept "a religion," and the conceptualizing of named religions, omit, we have argued, the transcendent dimension from what they seek to represent' (p. 139). As has been already intimated, this omission results in a serious misunderstanding of the subject matter.

The second reason why the concepts which interpret man's religious life in terms of such reified existents are inadequate for the academic observer is their failure to grapple seriously with the dynamic historical character of human existence. Interpretation which utilizes the concept 'religion' (and its cognates) aspires to define the essence of the variegated religious phenomena which appear before the observer. The search for essences is misapplied, however, when it is directed towards the reality of historical responses to the transcendent. For living reality — especially deep personal involvements — cannot be passed through a conceptual strainer designed to isolate its essence without suffering serious distortion. Using 'Hinduism' as an example, Smith writes: 'The empirical religious tradition of the Hindus is not to be compressed within or eviscerated into or confused with any systematic intellectual pattern' (p. 144).

So far I have indicated Smith's arguments which lead him to conclude that

the concept 'religion' is not a serviceable tool for enabling the historian of religion to understand adequately the phenomena which confront him. Neither, argues Smith, does the concept permit the involved man of faith satisfactorily to conceptualize his commitment to the transcendent. Here the argument is simple but profound. When systems of canon, creed, code, cult, and community are objectified into ideal patterns – into 'religions' – to be pursued for their own sake rather than regarded as appropriate responses to the gracious presence of the divine, then they have, in effect, become idols distracting persons from a true relation to the living God. Smith characterizes the man of faith in this way: 'The more direct, immediate, and profound his faith, the more he is concerned with something, or Someone, that far transcends anything that can be denominated as religion. This concept is fundamentally a distraction to his religiousness' (p. 128). Essentially the same point is reiterated in the following passage, though here it is made explicit that the concept 'religion' denotes the external and observable cumulative tradition of the participant: 'A lively faith involves a limpid sincerity of relationship to one's fellow men, and to oneself, and to the Creator or ground or totality of the universe. For these things the formalities of one's religious tradition are at best a channel, and at worst a substitute' (p. 129).

3. ITS PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

To understand adequately Smith's conception of faith, it is first necessary to appreciate his world-view, against the background of which his analysis is elaborated. The philosophical orientation of Smith's work may be described as personalist and historical. By 'personalist' I mean first of all the concern with the interior life of man – the qualities of vision, freedom and creativity, for example. Secondly, the designation 'personalist' alludes to the ascription of highest value to the relation of love between men.

The term 'historical' denotes an appreciation of the movement and change in the affairs of men. It conveys the sense that cultural products, social organizations, institutions, systems of world interpretation, for example, are in a state of flux. Moreover, to describe an outlook as 'historical' indicates that it takes into full account the manner in which the lives of men are, at least in part, shaped by the movement and direction of external forces.

Perhaps these two aspects of Smith's philosophical orientation should be regarded as essentially the same thing since history is the unfolding in time of the results of the decisions and actions of free personal agents. But it does seem useful to distinguish them for methodological purposes.

II. *Smith's Concept of Faith*

1. FAITH AS A PERSONAL QUALITY

Smith's intensely personalist philosophical background is reflected in his understanding of faith. His first insistence is that faith must be understood as

a profound and dynamic quality of persons. He writes: 'Without yet knowing what it is, we may nonetheless affirm with confidence that there is some personal and inner quality in the life of some men, and to it we give the name faith, in relation to which overt observables are for those men religiously significant' (p. 171). This same emphasis is frequently reiterated, as in the following instance: 'In our analysis the question of religious faith is a question concerning a living quality of the particular persons who may hold it, rather than of any traditional form of its expression' (p. 179).

Although few nowadays would want to contravene this presentation of faith as a dynamic personal quality, if nothing more was said the concept would be largely vacuous. Bearing in mind Smith's personalist orientation, we should recognize that a considerable degree of intellectual inadequacy and imprecision is inescapable in conceptualizing personal, existential realities. We must nevertheless, attempt a more thorough specification of faith; to this we now proceed.

The ideas of personal faith and external tradition that Smith formulates systematically in *The Meaning and End of Religion* are not a sudden innovation in his thought. It is possible to trace the development of these notions from their initial proposal in his earlier works to their statement in the above-mentioned book, which was intended as a full-scale exposition of the theory and method of the comparative study of religion. Thus we already find in Smith's contribution to the Eliade and Kitagawa volume on *The History of Religions*⁵ an insistence on personal faith as the primary subject matter of comparative religion studies. In discussing modern trends in this field of enquiry, Smith points out that 'the first and altogether fundamental step has been the gradual recognition of what was always true in principle, but was not always grasped: that the study of a religion is the study of persons ... Faith is a quality of men's lives.'⁶

This stress on a personal quality as the proper subject matter of comparative religion is contrasted with a preoccupation with what Smith calls the externals of religion. In these words Smith indicts a certain positivist school of social scientists: 'A fundamental error of the social sciences, and a fundamental lapse even of some humanists, has been to take the observable manifestations of some human concern as if they were the concern itself. The proper study of mankind is by inference. The externals of religion – symbols, institutions, doctrines, practices – can be examined separately; and this is largely what in fact was happening until quite recently, perhaps particularly in European scholarship. But these things are not in themselves religion.'⁷ To summarize: 'The student is making effective progress when he recognizes that he has to do not with religious systems basically but with religious persons; or at least, with something interior to persons.'⁸

5. W. C. Smith, 'Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?' in M. Eliade and J. M. Kitagawa (eds.), *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 31–58.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

8. *Ibid.*

In *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Smith does little to elaborate the content of faith, beyond saying that it is a personal quality related both to an external tradition and to transcendence. It is clear, however, from his *The Faith of Other Men*⁹ that he understands *personal faith* as existential selfhood. *Religious faith* is further understood as existential selfhood that is induced by, and finds expression in, a religious tradition. In this briefer and more popular work, Smith sets out the personal meaning or existential interpretation of particular items in the diverse external cumulative traditions in which believers participate. In dealing with the Hindus, Smith isolates the formula *tat tvam asi*, and about it he writes, '*Tat tvam asi* was originally formulated because some perceptive and outstanding religious person wrestled with the problem of life and thought, and finally came up with this report of how he saw the universe. It has persisted now for twenty-some centuries and has been cherished, because other men, too, have tested it, and found it satisfying – something by which one could live, and die.'¹⁰ Faith, then, is that fundamental personal quality in which someone establishes his ultimate concern.

2. FAITH AS CORRELATED WITH THE CUMULATIVE TRADITION

Our grasp of Smith's concept of faith may be extended by understanding how, in his thought, faith is related to its external expression in the accumulating traditions in which the faithful participate. For Smith has too acute a sense of history to allow religious faith to be conceived simply as the cultivation of subjective religious feelings or commitments. Though he espouses an intensely personalist orientation, he repudiates an individualism which is blind to the manner in which human life is profoundly shaped by its historical context, and, in turn, influences it. Thus he affirms: 'Faith ... is a personal quality of which we see many sorts of expression' (p. 185).

To designate this expression of faith, Smith invents the organizing concept 'cumulative tradition.' The term 'cumulative tradition' refers to that visible aspect of man's religious life which has been and continues to be copiously surveyed and documented by the historians of religion. Smith's own definition is expressed in the following statement: 'By "cumulative tradition" I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe' (p. 156).

What (we must now ask) is the relation between these externals of religion, which heretofore have been the chief preoccupation of scholarship, and the interior quality of persons, which is now seen as primary? The cumulative tradition functions in relation to faith in two ways: first, as the *expression* of

9. New York: Mentor Books, 1965.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

faith, and second, as the *ground* of faith. We have already observed how Smith refuses to restrict faith simply to the cultivation of inward feelings or convictions unrelated to history. Personal faith exteriorizes itself, and has an observable impact on history in creating discernible institutions and systems. The externals – the scriptures, doctrines, morals, and institutions – are the expression in history of personal faith.

We must note, however, that the cumulative tradition functions in another way also: it is the instrument by which faith is evoked in successive generations. Smith explains this function of tradition in this manner: 'It is because the materials of a cumulative tradition serve each generation as the ground of a transcendent faith that they persist. The objective data of a tradition exist in this world and are observable by an historian; but they continue to exist and to be observable because for the men and women who use them they serve as windows through which they see a world beyond' (p. 160). Going back to his earlier essay, we learn that personal faith assumes its distinctive quality by the existential meaning that these external elements in a tradition come to have for its adherents. There Smith says: 'Religion ... lies rather in the area of what these *mean* to those that are involved.'¹¹

Further insight into the correlation of personal faith with the external tradition may be attained by examining the qualifier 'religious' in Smith's use of the phrase 'religious faith.' The following quotation corroborates the suggestion above that religious faith is the dynamic selfhood induced in a person by a tradition that is existentially interpreted: 'Religious faith is what happens to or in a man when he responds to the universe in a way that has been made available to him by the or a cumulative tradition' (p. 330, n.12). On this definition, *religious* faith is an existential self-understanding and life-commitment that has come into being by understanding a religious tradition in an existentially meaningful way.

In a sentence, Smith summarizes this dual role of the cumulative tradition: 'It *crystallizes* in material form the faith of previous generations, and it *sets the context* for the faith of each new generation as these come along' (p. 159, my italics).

3. FAITH AS CORRELATED WITH TRANSCENDENCE

Faith is not to be understood in Smith's thought, however, as simply standing in a reciprocal relation to an external religious tradition. The fundamental significance of faith, indeed, is that it makes possible in a man's life a meeting and relationship with ultimate worth and reality. Faith is correlated with transcendence. On this point Smith writes: 'Faith, therefore, is not an entity. It is, rather, the adjectival quality of a person's living in terms of transcendence' (p. 331, n.12).

We saw earlier that the correlation of faith with the cumulative tradition involved a two-fold relationship. On the one hand, faith created the tradition:

11. Smith, 'Comparative Religion: Whither – and Why?' p. 35 (my italics).

the tradition is the result of faith expressing itself in the world. On the other hand, the tradition mediates faith: it is the 'impression' of the tradition on the person that evokes his faith. Now we must note that the same kind of reciprocity pertains to the correlation of faith and transcendence. In the first place, faith enables a relationship with transcendence. To have faith means that a person is inserted into a dimension of life whose boundaries are not exhausted by those of the individual ego. In expounding this view, Smith writes: 'Because of his faith or through it, [the man of religious faith] is or claims to be in touch with another world transcending this' (p. 154). Man's capacity to apprehend and live in transcendence through faith is brought out in another place where Smith writes that 'Christians have certainly claimed that they (as persons) are (*through faith*) in touch with Truth, absolute and final' (p. 184, my italics).

On the other hand, it is the impingement of transcendence that evokes faith. Smith will not allow that faith is simply the result of a sensitive imagination, creating a quality of life out of its own resources. Nor will he concede that faith is nothing but a sociological phenomenon, the formation of personality by a person's cultural tradition. Rather, faith is regarded as a response to man's transcendent environment, however that may be conceived. 'Faith,' says Smith, 'not only is but ought to be mundane, man's response' (p. 192). It is made clear in the context that the response in question is to the transcendent. This two-fold correlation of faith with tradition and transcendence is brought out in the following quotation from Smith's *Islam in Modern History*, which antedates the publication of *The Meaning and End of Religion*. 'Each religion [at that point Smith was still using 'religion' in a positive sense, though obviously trying to rehabilitate it by imputing a personalist meaning] is the point at which its adherent is in touch, through the intermediary of an accumulating tradition, with the infinitude of the divine. It is the chief means through which God takes hold of the person, in so far as that person will allow.'¹² Religious personal faith ('religion' in the context of the last quotation) is that existential quality of life which is induced by the communicant's cumulative tradition and is informed by transcendence.

III. Appraisal

It will be interesting to see how Smith's thesis is received. He is himself aware of the likelihood of appreciable resistance; the orthodox will find that he has compromised the exclusivist claims of the gospel of Christ, while the non-believing academics will be disconcerted by his insistence on the reality and role of transcendence. I find his proposals, with certain reservations, not only provocative, but also personally engaging. The caveats I want to register, in this paper, are admittedly minor ones – essentially matters of terminology.

12. W. C. Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (New York: Mentor Books, 1959). p. 15. (This book was first published by Princeton University Press, 1957.)

They do not strike at the validity of Smith's twofold conceptual device for interpreting mankind's religiousness, but simply question the propriety and clarity of his nomenclature.

1. IS SMITH'S NOMENCLATURE APPROPRIATE?:
STAGES IN THE DYNAMICS OF FAITH

In *The Meaning and End of Religion* the word 'faith' functions characteristically, in the first place, as a comprehensive term to denote the whole of man's interior life as it recognizes and responds to the overtures of the transcendent. Now it is true that in ordinary usage faith is frequently used this way. It is also true that in much contemporary discussion faith has taken on a rather technical significance, denoting one aspect of that total inward response, namely, the initial phase of man's response to some claim experienced as authoritative. In the context of theological discussion this means the existential act of decision and commitment, in which one trustfully accepts the authority of God who conveniently discloses himself. Subsequent to this decision and commitment there follows a life of more or less sustained companionship with God thus known.

It is more in keeping with prevailing usage to restrict the term 'faith' to this prior, largely volitional stage of man's religious life. This priority is both chronological and logical. The time reference, however, need not be construed only as a single conversion point, but may be viewed also as a daily recommitment.

On these grounds we have to conclude that Smith uses 'faith' in a wider sense than is appropriate for clarity in contemporary discussion – in a wider sense in that his use of 'faith' encompasses the whole of man's interior response to the approach of transcendence. A more precise use would be to limit its application to the initial phase of human response to some reality experienced as supremely valuable and incontestably authoritative, namely, the existential act of decision and commitment.

This proposal leaves us with another problem: if 'faith' is restricted to the initial act of trust whereby mysterious transcendence is apprehended (naturally, only in a degree commensurate with our finitude and sin), then how shall we designate the state of sustained living in, and out of, that transcendence? Smith is aware of the problems and tentatively suggests that the term 'piety' be so employed, but it is clear that in the definitive formulation of his new conceptual approach he opts for faith as a comprehensive term. This may be because of the negative connotation that 'piety' has assumed in some contemporary theological circles, especially of the neo-orthodox sort.

2. IS SMITH'S NOMENCLATURE APPROPRIATE?:
TRANSCENDENCE AND THE OBJECT OF FAITH

In a number of places Smith advances the view that faith is correlative with transcendence. It follows, therefore, that an understanding of what he means

by transcendence should throw some light on his meaning of faith. Among the questions that a clarification of the meaning of transcendence would help us to answer is this: Is personal faith (existential selfhood), in fact, *inherently* connected with transcendence construed ontically? In simpler words: Are faith and God necessarily correlative terms? It is regrettable that a consistent understanding of transcendence does not seem to emerge in *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

In most instances of his use of the term 'transcendence' Smith seems to have in mind ultimate reality, supremely real and valuable being. His frequent references to God, as transcendence theistically understood, corroborate this inference. In this vein we should note also his definitions of faith as the ability to see God. If this usage is definitive, we shall have to conclude that, where a particular existential selfhood does not serve as the entry of ultimate reality into the life of the believer, we must, in the interests of linguistic clarity, speak of the absence of faith, even if such a person possesses an integrated and single-minded orientation to life. If the concept 'faith' is inseparably linked with transcendence, and further, if transcendence means supernatural reality – God – then where there is no apprehension of God we cannot properly speak of faith.

If, on the other hand, transcendence is interpreted as any supreme value, not manufactured out of the finite self, but transcending the ego, which the self acknowledges as authoritative and to which it commits itself, then we would, in this case, speak of faith even in the absence of a supernatural or ontic referent. In this latter understanding faith is a much wider concept. It implies that any consistent selfhood should be designated as faith, whether it is directed towards supernatural reality (godly faith) or not (secular faith).

Now there are times when Smith does seem to have widened his use of the concept 'transcendence' so that it has a secular as well as an ontic and sacred reference. He speaks, for example, of the historic problem of faith and reason 'as the problem of a person participant in two cumulative traditions, through each of which he is introduced to a transcendent that can be for him ultimately valuable and finally demanding' (p. 321, n.9). The fact that Smith can refer to reliance on the presuppositions and methods of reason as an introduction to transcendence suggests that transcendence here no longer bears the meaning of extramundane reality but, rather, of any object or idea that elicits a person's whole hearted allegiance.

Further evidence of a wide nontheological use of transcendence may be seen, perhaps, in Smith's allusion to 'the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, where ultimate reality as *dharma* is itself a transcendent pattern of right conduct, so that even the intellectual expression of faith, let alone the practical, is in ethical terms' (p. 179). This passage may be interpreted to mean that the concept 'transcendence' does not necessarily entail a supernatural or spiritual reality independent of man, but rather, any claim – even a nontheological one – that is acknowledged as ultimate. In this case the transcendent would be the ideal pattern of behaviour that an enlightened one follows.

In spite of these fragmentary pieces of evidence, I think we must conclude, on the basis of the general drift of Smith's thought, that his dominant use of 'transcendence' is with regard to divine reality, to primal being. If this is the case, it follows that faith, which in Smith's scheme is inherently correlated with transcendence, is (in the popular sense of the word) a 'religious' concept. Faith is that personal quality in which men are enabled to apprehend the supernatural world, to know God.

It appears that such usage is, in the context of contemporary theological discussion, a misleadingly narrow sense for faith. A more consistent and illuminating use of the concept of faith would be to extend its application to *all* life-commitments to ultimate value – the so-called secular as well as the explicitly spiritual or theological.¹ Using 'faith' in this way would serve to underline the structurally similar character of humanist and religious commitment to indemonstrable ultimates. Accordingly, we may speak of Marxist faith or scientific faith or faith in God, whenever the object of commitment is looked on as exercising a final authority over us that warrants a total dedication of our life to its entailed imperatives. It should be noted that this concern to stress the formal analogy between humanist faith and godly faith is also evident in the preceding section on the stages in the dynamics of faith, where it is pointed out that the initial stage in coming to a conviction of certitude about *any* putative ultimate truth about life and destiny is that of existential decision and commitment. To this stage, we saw, the word 'faith' is customarily applied.

The indication of these terminological perplexities in Smith's methodological programme ought not to keep us from recognizing the fundamental soundness of his proposal for analyzing mankind's religiousness in terms of the concepts of personal faith and cumulative tradition. It should be construed, rather, as an appeal for further clarification of this illuminating and fruitful approach to understanding man's religious life.

13. In this context 'ultimate value' means value experienced as ultimate by the person making the commitment.