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"Faith, Belief and Transcendence" According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith

Introduction

Wilfred Cantwell Smith is one of the most important Canadian thinkers in the field of religion today. It may also be readily argued that this encomium applies with much wider scope. I suspect that if his works on Islam — especially *Islam in Modern History*[1] — had been widely read, recent events in Iran and other parts of the Muslim world would have been neither unexpected nor unintelligible to Western observers. It is difficult not to be impressed — even intimidated — by the arguments of one who does his own translations from Swedish, Arabic, Latin and Sanskrit, to specify only a few of the original languages from which Smith draws his evidence. The excursions through his compendious and erudite notes (a feature which has become a sort of trademark — sometimes irritating — of his books) provides a fascinating exposure to a wide range of historical and comparative religious information.

A Further preliminary point before passing to a detailed analysis of Smith's thesis about the distinction between faith and belief, concerns its degree of novelty. This subdivides into two questions : Is Smith saying something in his recent, philosophical work that has not been said (as fully) in his previous writings? And, second, is Smith's argument original in the context of contemporary reflection on religion ?

With respect to the first question, it must be conceded that much in *Belief and History*[2] and *Faith and Belief*[3] is a consolidation of what has gone before. In itself this is a useful achievement, given the significance of Smith's thought. Important new ground, however, is

1. Princeton University Press, 157; London: Oxford University Press, 1958. Reprinted as Mentor Book, New American Library, New York, 1959.
2. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977.
3. Princeton University Press, 1979; page numbers in the text refer to this book.

broken, especially in his elucidation of modern believing and its distinction from faith. As regards the second question, it must be granted that there are similarities between Smith's analysis of faith and that of other philosophers of religion. Indeed, it might be suggested that he shares some of the commonplaces of contemporary, existential theology. However, there are also profound differences; first on the level of procedure and second on that of substance.

Whereas most contemporary philosophers of religion extrapolate from their understanding of Christian, even Western, Christian experience, (or, as do some linguistic analysis, from an idea of God in which neither they nor religious persons "believe"), Smith grounds his inductions in the data of a number of traditions. Thus he is able to work towards his aim of formulating a *generic* concept of human faith with the confidence that his formulations — being more than a contestable inference from Western religiousness — is more likely to capture the universal human quality of faith. Not only his analysis of faith and belief but also his treatment of germane concepts like knowledge, history, revelation, share this same grounding in historical data drawn, in his characteristic comparativist procedure, from a global and temporal diversity of traditions.

But Smith's distinctiveness resides not only in his sustained comparativist approach, but also in the originality of his analysis of modern believing, to which we shall turn in a moment. Also to be noted is his assumption of the role of culture critic of modernity, and though this is certainly not an unprecedented function (to mention only Nietzsche, Spengler, and Ellul) his approach from the field of comparative religion is.

Faith and Belief

The chief intention of Smith's programme in his recent work, most notably *Faith and Belief,* is to clarify the distinction between faith and belief, " . . . Historical understanding enables us, and indeed forces us, to distinguish between faith and religious belief." (p. viii). But his project does much more than the clarification of terms. Beyond the terms lie fundamental understandings of human religiousness, and one of the merits of Smith's work is his delineation of two basic modes of relating to religious traditions—one designated by "faith", the other by (modern) "believing". First, the term faith.

Initially, Smith differentiates faith and belief in a straight-forward way that is probably common currency among philosophical theologians. "Faith" is the primary datum of religious life, the transcendent personal quality of commitment to supreme truth and value.

More fully, faith may be analysed under three aspects. First of all faith is a personal quality that exists in relation to a tradition. "Faith, then, is an engagement . . . with tradition" (p. 5). Again, " 'Faith', then I propose, shall signify human quality that has been expressed, has been elicited, nurtured and shaped by the religious traditions of the world" (p. 6). Smith avows it is one of his intentions in *Faith and Belief* to understand the involvement of devotees with the particular data of their traditions. In this he certainly succeeds in a general way.

But, in the second place, this engagement with tradition is of a special and important kind, for faith turns a religious tradition into a religious life. He notes "that it is this involvement that bestows on the data [of tradition] their religious significance, as well as bestowing on the persons their changed lives . . . . It is the faith of Muslims that has made the *Qur'an* the Word of God."

In other words, faith is a person's basic existential orientation as this has been stipulated by the symbolic meanings of his tradition. Among the repeated references to this aspect of faith, the following is typical: "It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension" (p. 12).

The precise modality by which involvement with a tradition induces faith is not amplified. I have suggested the possibility of using Bultmann's concept of existential interpretation as a tool for analysing how the meaning of the devotees' traditions becomes the meaning of the world, that is their faith.[4] Faith as existential interpretation, is the modality – the process – that transforms religious tradition into religious life.

4. This point about faith as the existential interpretation of tradition was elaborated in my "What is Comparative Religion Comparing",? *Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion*, Vol. VI, No. 1, Spring, 1967.

Finally, it is the correlation of faith with transcendence that raises particularly acute problems in understanding faith. Smith's declaration in his exposition of *credo* is typical: "A comparativist looking out over the religious history of mankind is liable to hold that faith cannot be defined; and yet he or she might be attracted to a characterizing of it as the capacity of human beings to devote themselves to transcendence" (p. 103). It is possible to mitigate this difficulty by so defining transcendence that it is a dimension of the human dynamic of faith. In this sense transcendence would refer to the theological ideal, value or truth to which the self commits itself in its conative quest to transform the defective empirical self. But, clearly, Smith means much more by 'transcendence'. For him the referent is also ontological, though it is difficult to pin it down with precision. Smith's interpretation of transcendence is amplified somewhat below.

The meaning of faith may be more adequately understood by seeing it in contrast with the alternative modality of belief, and so to this we turn. However, the discrimination between faith and belief turns out to be no easy or straightforward matter, at least in part, because belief, in turn, has no single or stable definition. An important contribution of Smith to our understanding of religiousness consists in his analysis of the historicity of the English term belief, that is, the tracing of its radical transformation of meaning from an earlier period to that of modern usage.

The sense of "belief" pervading the Introduction may be grasped by looking at it against the background of the theoretical framework elaborated in *The Meaning and End of Religion*.[5] There Smith worked out the distinction between faith which is the primary, creative religious impulse, and cumulative tradition which encompasses the manifold forms of its expression. Beliefs are an expression of faith—an intellectual expression — though many other types of expression are possible such as ritual, architecture, music. Moreover, beliefs (and all other expressions of faith) may in turn evoke and sustain faith in the immediate participant and in subsequent generations. In short, belief, in this sense, is a propositional expression of faith and is not to be confused with the personal faith itself.

5. New York: MacMillan. 1963.

But in exegeting Smith it is essential to keep clearly in mind an even more important distinction which he labours to underscore. This is the distinction between the early (that is, medieval, Renaissance, and king James) meaning of belief where it is equivalent to faith, and the modern sense where it means propositional expression, as above, or far more significantly, propositions about which one's uncertainty approaches a judgement of falsity. In this latter, modern instance, believing is an alternative modality to faith in orienting oneself to a religious tradition and to the world. To relate oneself to religious realities by believing them is to adopt an attitude of tentativeness regarding their truth and value.

Devotees of classical religious periods usually did have beliefs, that is intellectually formulated expressions of the world-view implicit in their faith, in their foundational perceptions, attitudes, commitments and valuations, but they did not believe them in the modern attenuated sense.

In sum, it is necessary for a proper understanding of Smith (and of human religious life) to keep in mind the distinctions between (1) believing, where it is equivalent to "beloving" or having faith; (2) beliefs which are rational expressions of faith; (3) modern believing where statements are adhered to provisionally.

The chapter on Buddhism brings out the important distinction between believing in God and having faith in God. Smith argues that while it may be affirmed that the Buddhist do not believe in God, that is, do not adhere with the mind to certain propositions about the absolute, some Buddhists manifestly have faith in God, that is, recognize and give allegiance to a divine quality in the universe.

An ambiguity obscures Smith's position in this debate. He concludes this chapter by declaring, "By shifting the question from whether Buddha and his followers believed in God (to which the answer is evidently 'no') to whether they had faith in God, we hope to have demonstrated that for some in the latter case the answer can or must be 'Yes' (p. 32). However, this assertion that Buddhists did not believe in God requires qualification. For Smith earlier established (or strongly suggested) that while Buddhists disavowed the personal Gods of their Hindu milieu, they did believe in God in a non-theistic sense. Smith had concluded respecting Buddhist theological beliefs:

"The answer is 'no', so far as any concept of a personal God is concerned" (p. 23). But, he argued, Nirvāṇa or (as he seems to prefer) Dharma is functionally "God", in the sense of a non-changing Absolute or sacred quality in the midst of the phenomenal world of flux. It is "now virtually established" among Western scholars that "Nirvāṇa was apprehended by Buddha and his early followers as having qualities of the divine, if by 'divine' one understands what theists in the West intend by this term" (p. 23).

The same conclusion, Smith contends, could be reached about Dharma: "All else is evanescent. But the Sāddharma, the True Law, is eternal" (p. 27). In other words, the early Buddhists not only had faith in God, they also believed in God, that is, adhered with the mind to an idea of a spiritual absolute. Smith, in fact, concedes as much albeit tentatively: "Our primary concern here is not to establish that certain ideas in the Buddhist scheme are ideas of transcendence (though a case for this can be made, and it would follow for some that these Buddhists believed in God)" (p. 25). In any event, it is clear that Buddhists did not believe in God in the modern, attenuated sense.

Transcendence

Various understandings of transcendence occur in Smith's work as a whole and in *Faith and Belief* particularly. Whether any of these interpretations logically exclude others, or whether they can be arranged in a scheme of hierarchical importance or approximation to truth are difficult questions which are left aside for the time. What follows is a brief description of these views of transcendence with representative citations to support them.

1. Conceptual Transcendence

Reality and truth always elude, in a greater or lesser degree, our fragmentary ideas about them. Accordingly, our propositions remain relative and corrigible. This is true not only of our present storehouse of ideas but is also true in principle: reality and truth will always be, in some measure, beyond human conceptual grasp. According to this view, transcendence is that dimension that escapes conceptual apprehension. Among passages illustrative of this insight are these:

> "For intellectuals as a class, one may suggest, faith is an attitude to truth, and specifically to truth as conceptua-

lizable, and more specifically still, to transcendent truth—not yet discovered, not yet known" (p. 81).

"Thomas [Aquinas] was well aware that truth transcends our present grasp; but also that man is so constituted as to be aware of this very fact, to perceive dimly (yet in a sense, to know) that there is more to truth than we have yet perceived . . ." (p. 82).

2. *Self-Transcendence*

Transcendence is the prospect for transformation of the empirical self with all its guilt, hostility, fear and finitude. The personal vision, the ideal self—whether perceived as the serene awakened one, the sacrificing universal lover, the perfectly surrendered one or whatever—towards which the alienated, historical person strives, may be looked upon as a transcendent goal. This is the transcendence implicit in personal faith understood as transformative orientation. About self-transcendence Smith writes:

"In the course of evolution, the emergence of man as distinct from the brutes, man as endowed with the capacity for faith, man as that creature whose nature it is to transcend him—or herself, and to be informed by the universe's transcendence: this much can be seen — perhaps poetically — as a divine gift" (p. 140).

3. *Cosmological Transcendence*

In the course of his examination of the Buddhist instance of faith Smith points to transcendence as a quality of the universe. He asks the question: Did Buddha and his followers have faith in God? and replies that "one's answer will be 'yes' if one means by God, at least in part, that quality of or reality in the universe in which he and they did have faith" (p. 32). According to this view "God" is simply a relative and dispensable name for a particular quality of the universe. This is what I have termed cosmological transcendence, and not the transcendence of a distinct supernatural person or world.[6]

6. See my "Contemporary Atheism and Cosmological Transcendence", *SR Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, forthcoming.

The same kind of language for transcendence occurs in Smith's exposition of the faith of Hindus. Here we find references to the transcendent quality and the transcendent dimension of the world and life. "For those for whom there is a transcendent quality to the universe and to man, . . . *āstikya* is the recognition of that quality. It is the awareness of transcendent" (p.58). "Further: *Āstikya-buddhi* . . . is awakeness to transcendence. To hold that faith is . . . the recognition that . . . the transcendent dimension of the world and of our lives is indeed there" (p. 59).

The same manner of speaking occurs again where we would least expect it, namely, in the treatment of *credo*. The thesis is proffered that "God" is a primary Western symbol for the experience of transcendence which need not be generated by a supernatural theistic source, but by the quality of existence itself. "Certainly the human experience is and from the beginning has been, open to a quality of life in oneself, in one's neighbour, and in the universe that lifts one above the merely mundane and the immediate . . ." (p. 129).

4. Moral Transcendence

The strain of the moralist is very strong, probably dominant, in Smith and on numerous occasions it seems that in the last analysis transcendence is best grasped as moral (or other value) absolute. The following are instances of this perspective :

> "Now that a world conspectus is available, it is evident that at most times and in most places humankind has been effectively aware that one lives in a world whose greatness transcends one's grasp but does not totally elude one, that Truth, Beauty, Justice, Love beckon one imperiously yet graciously" (p. 130).

> "Secularism has to be thus positive, . . . has to be, as at its best it has mightily been, a matter of faith: faith in reason and truth, in justice, and in man" (p. 134).

We noted earlier that Smith considers two views of transcendence in Theravada Buddhism. The first (and most widely held) is that Nirvāṇa, understood as an unchanging metaphysical absolute akin to the Upanishadic Brahman, is the Buddhist's transcendence. The other possibility is *Sāddharma,* the True Law. In its normative, ultimate

form *(paramartha sāddharma)* it is a transcendent reality that abides eternally over against the impermanent flux of ordinary life.

There is no doubt which of these alternatives Smith prefers. Though he makes a cursory attempt to reconcile them, the mystical ontology of Nirvāṇa largely disappears in the this-worldly transcendence of the moral life.

5. Metaphysical Transcendence

A further interpretation of transcendence sees it as a non-personal metaphysical absolute. Beyond the phenomenal world of space-time which is ultimately unreal or unworthy, or both, there is a realm of being of absolute purity and bliss.

Smith argues, for example, that effectively Buddhism is atheistic "so far as any concept of a personal God is concerned" (p. 23). Personal divine beings may exist at certain levels but they are not God, that is not absolute and unconditioned. But Smith raises the question whether Buddhists accepted some new divinity in place of the old (theistic) one. He examines the possibility of Nirvāṇa and/or Dharma serving as surrogates for the theists' God. Either of these would be instances of non-theistic transcendence. Nirvāṇa was apprehended by Buddha and his early followers as having qualities of the divine, if by "divine" one understands what theists in the West intend by this term" (p. 23).

Beyond the transient, phenomenal world there is the "further shore" of Nirvāṇa which is the transcendent and ultimate reality. On the basis of this interpretation, one might say, that for Theravada Buddhists, the transcendent is a metaphysical otherness.

Smith further illustrates this form of transcendence with the case of Samkhya philosophy. Samkhya is atheistic—in the narrow literal sense—but possesses an ontology of *purusha* or eternal spiritual realities. Within the Hindu tradition it is approved as *āstikya*, as a school of thought has discerned transcendence beyond the world of appearance.

6. Theistic Transcendence

The final form of transcendence which we find in Smith is that which is probably most widely dispersed among the religious peoples

of the world, namely personal deity. In expositing *credo*, Smith asserts that "The starting point and foundation of Thomas' view of faith is that its object as primal truth and ultimate reality is God . . ." (p. 91). His own conclusion is: "Faith is man's participation in God's dealing with humankind" (p. 140).

It is evident that Smith would not abandon any of these six experiences and interpretations of transcendence. How they are to be integrated, however, is not clear. Having taken us so far, Smith still owes us an all-out assault on the meaning of transcendence which, in his scheme, is integrally related to faith. In the meantime, probably because of his convictions about the limitation and relativity of reasoning (conceptual transcendence), Smith does not seem greatly exercised by this debt.

It may be illuminating to view Smith at one level as a sort of natural theologian who moves from the observation of history to the reality of transcendence. In this respect, he is reminiscent of Nathan Söderblom who declared on his death-bed: "There is a living God; I can prove it by the history of religions."[7]

And yet, in the final analysis, Smith's conclusions remain ineluctably existentialist. That humankind has over past millennia regarded itself as related to transcendence does not in itself constitute an invincible argument in favour of transcendence. A Freudian analysis that people need to outgrow their illusions is no less logical. And so ultimately the matter is tilted to one side rather than the other by existential decision, by a "leap of faith".

CONCLUSION

1. Faith and doubt

Smith, we noted, alludes frequently to the inadequacy of all conceptualizations to express faith or the transcendence grasped in faith. All intellectual expressions are historically and culturally specific and, therefore, relative. They are at best approximations to the truth. Thus Smith, reporting on representative religious thinkers of the

7. From biographical introduction by Yngve Brilioth in Nathan Söderblom, The *Living God: Basal Forms of Personal Religion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. xxviii.

beginning of this millennium, declares that "Their insight was of a reality that transcended not only the material world, but—by far—their own apprehension of it. They were unanimous in saying that anything that they might have to say about that reality fell far short of the whole truth" (p. 161). This is, of course, the mystical element found in numerous religious thinkers, Smith included. Reality may be apprehended experientially with a sense of certitude even though it may not be apprehended (adequately) conceptually.

But a much more radical question intrudes. Smith's analysis of belief and faith skirts but does not adequately explore the possibility and (I believe!) reality of holding committedly to something about which one has not only difficulties of articulation but grave intellectual doubts. Admittedly, this prospect visualizes a sort of schizophrenia where the integrity of intellectual belief and volitional engagement is split. Nevertheless, it is quite possible for one to have intellectual doubts about the reality of God, for example, and yet make the existential decision to live as though that reality and its implied imperatives were not in doubt.

To put the matter another way: tentativeness of opinion regarding the factual truth of something (which modern believing implies), does not necessarily mean tentativeness of existential commitment. Indeed, it might be argued that it is in the face of intellectually insurmountable doubts, that personal engagement becomes essential as a way of living with an underlying orientation.

A case could be made that the present day activity of believing religious statements, that is, adhering to them with a sense of their coexistence with a range of other theoretical possibilities and therefore their tentativeness, rather than being a ground for rebuke may be viewed as a commendable recognition of the relativity (and even problematicalness) of all conceptualizations. Earlier attitudes that regarded their "beliefs" as a straightforward recognition of the indisputable factual structure of reality, may be censured for naiveté! The alternative adumbrated here is the possibility that propositional incertitude may go hand in hand with an existentialist posture of positive commitment. Though Smith argues correctly that faith transcends any conceptualization of its objects, he appears not to concede (in the present book) that believing (tentatively) is the appropriate intellectual response in the modern, pluralistic context.

2. Positive and Negative Faith

A difficulty arises from the fact that Smith is operating with two, not totally reconciled, interpretations of faith. In the first descriptive case it is a generic human quality characterized principally by volition. In this sense faith indicates the general quality of risking engagement associated with existentialist thought. In the second interpretation, faith is a quality that while necessarily incorporating such commitment is positively appraised. In this second, normative usage, faith is a highly desirable — even humanly essential-quality. This second interpretation is clearly seen in Smith's replacement of the concept of God by the concept of faith in the following:

> "... the only true atheist is he who loves no one and whom no one loves; who does not care for truth, sees no beauty; strives for no justice; who knows no courage and no joy; finds no meaning, and has lost all hope." (p. 20)

To be without faith is to be doomed to bleak despondency.

Although Smith nods occasionally in the direction of a negative possibility for faith, it is clear that his heart is not in it. And the reason is clear: ultimately the principal defining characteristic of faith is openness to transcendence and for Smith this can never be a bad thing. He shows little awareness of the option that holds, that transcendence itself has a "shadow" or negative dimension, that transcendence encompasses good *and* evil. To the extent that faith is limited and deformed, this is a function of historical conditions or personal inadequacy. Typically, faith is positive and redemptive for it is that human quality that comes into being when transcendence is discerned.

The existentialist component of faith is prominent in the earlier chapters; in his conclusion, however, it is the more explicitly spiritual or theological element ("awareness of transcendence") that is stressed. One consequence of this is that the wider more generic interpretation of faith that prevails, when the existentialist or commissive element is seen as central, is sacrificed to a more circumscribed (transcendental) interpretation. For faith to be a truly generic quality (and concept) it would have to embrace negative as well as positive manifestations. In spite of occasional acknowledgements of the negative, the demonic and destructive dimension of faith, Smith basically understands it as an ennobling human quality. This conclusion seems inevitable given

his correlation of faith with transcendence, and his premise that transcendence is by nature good.

3. Faith and Transcendence

Faith, it was observed, is that human involvement with a tradition in such a way that (1) there is a dialectical extracting and imparting of meaning and (2) life's orientation is thereby changed. So far this is fairly neutral and safe. But then there is an abrupt Advance. Faith is not only engagement with a tradition so that it generates ultimate perspectives and, in turn, expresses them, faith also becomes engagement with God. Smith characterizes his study as *fides quaerens intellectum* and goes on to explain that this consists of "the search for conceptual clarification of man's relation to transcendence" (p. 6).

One might well sympathize with the uneasy apprehension that something has been sneaked in — that we have moved from an historical and objectively perceptible human process, to a problematic and subjective reconstruction. Even those who feel that transcendence is the ultimate truth in life might share this methodological uneasiness.

It is noteworthy that in his procedural summation (in the very next sentence following the above), Smith opts for the more objective, historical characterization of faith as relation to tradition and remains silent on transcendence. "Faith, then, I propose, shall signify that human quality that has been expressed in, has been elicited, nurtured, and shaped by, the religious traditions of the world" (p. 6).

4. Affinities and Innovations

I return to the question of originality. Smith himself speaks of "bold new positions", "novel generic pluralism" and "radically new thinking." Smith's thesis distinguishing faith and belief is radical, but — on certain levels, as he explicitly acknowledges — neither novel nor unique. He has arrived independently, via the route of comparative religion, at certain conclusions that others have reached by more traditional theological speculation. The style of hermeneutic with affinities to Feuerbach and Bultmann contending that theology is anthropology, has, even on the pastoral and homiletic level, discerned that diversity of beliefs does not necessarily entail lack of faith or diversity of faith. Just as fundamentalists have, by internalizing the literal biblical narrative of the creation and fall of Adam and Eve, oriented themselves to the world and others in an attitude of graditude

and guilt, even so humanists, with quite different intellectual convictions about the origin of the human species, have appropriated the same existential orientations, and they have had the same faith even while believing differently.

The Christian theological milieu in which I was trained appreciated that believing did not merely mean theoretical acknowledgement, and certainly not a sceptical attitude towards an assertion. It seemed to be generally taken for granted — in the existentialist intellectual atmosphere of the fifties — that believing necessarily carried the sense of trust and commitment. The depth of such understanding and the extent to which its implications were clearly grasped is, however, a matter for discussion. Nevertheless, it may be claimed that some of Smith's central thesis are fairly conventional.

Yet there can be no doubt that what he has contributed is a monumental documentation of the position that the central religious category is faith and, further, that the term belief has through the ages so radically altered its meaning that it is no longer the obvious term for rendering classical faith. An additional aspect of his analysis is that to the extent that modern religious persons retain the word "belief" to express their experience of faith, they do so in stressful tension with its prevailing, modern sceptical sense. More than that, they run the grave danger of unwittingly importing some of the intellectualist and sceptical connotations into their understanding of Christian faith and thereby distorting its authentic sense.