



Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's "The Meaning and End of Religion"

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Talal Asad

READING A MODERN
CLASSIC: W. C. SMITH'S
*The Meaning and
End of Religion*

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was a remarkable scholar of comparative religion who died in Toronto on February 7, 2000, at the age of eighty-three. A Canadian by origin, he studied in Cambridge and taught at numerous universities, including Harvard University (where he directed the Center for the Study of World Religions) and McGill University (whose Institute of Islamic Studies he founded). Although he was a believing Christian, an ordained Presbyterian minister, he cultivated an active interest in the followers of other religions, especially Islam. His work has been influential in religious studies worldwide and was translated not only into several European languages but into Asian languages too. In 1962 he published a book entitled *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which is perhaps his most famous work, one that is most widely cited by historians of comparative religion. It is this book that I want to discuss in what follows, because it represents some of the strengths and weaknesses of religious studies as seen from one perspective.

The Meaning and End of Religion contains many insights and was the first to argue against essentialist definitions of religion. I find myself in sympathy with its antiessentialist instinct. And yet in the end I find that it too clings to an essentialism—one that pushes away important questions for comparative research. I propose in this article to engage with Smith's text, drawing out of that dialogue what I think is important for the comparative study of religion. In particular, I make two general points, both of which are difficult to appreciate from Smith's approach.

First, I emphasize that in order to pay serious attention to religious experience in a comparative context, we must examine carefully the part played by religious practices in the formation of such experiences. And second, I plead for the integration of “secularism” into the analysis of religion—that is, for examining secularism not merely as a political ideology that structures the modern liberal state but as an untidy historical complex that includes behavior, knowledge, and sensibility in the flow of everyday life. Both my points share this assumption: that in identifying what we call “religion”—whether musical, pictorial, or textual—the materialities of religion are integral to its constitution. Although I do not explore the varieties of media here, I stress again and again that understanding them is necessary to the task of analyzing and comparing religious experience, behavior and commitment.

I want to emphasize at the start that despite my arguments with it, I regard Smith’s book to be indispensable reading for any student of comparative religion. Criticism, in my view, is most useful when it aims at reformulating the questions underlying a work, not at demolishing it. In such an engagement it seems to me more fruitful to try to shift critical attention toward what one thinks important for research and inquiry. In what follows, I try to do this with Smith’s masterpiece *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

SMITH’S ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

The book’s attempt to address the old question of the nature of religion by denying that it has any essence was truly original. But let me begin with the book’s explicit philosophical starting point. For its contention that religion has no essence is based on a particular theory of naming and a particular ontology of the social. According to Smith, nouns should not name things that do not “really exist” in the world, and because in the realm of human affairs it is only persons who really exist, it is only they who can be nominated. This ontology of the social is familiar to historians of thought as methodological individualism, the doctrine that all collective phenomena can be reduced for explanatory purposes to individual persons. Thus, Smith writes that “apart from the proper names of persons, the only nouns that can stand up to final scrutiny are ‘God’ . . . and ‘man’ . . . All else is either a conceptual abstraction and/or adjectival.”¹

The argument is that no thing corresponds, properly speaking, to the noun “religion.” The use of that term to refer to what does exist—namely, the personal quality of faith—therefore inevitably reifies it. “Indeed,” so Smith warns us, “among all traditions the Christian has had perhaps more

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 327, n. 3.

reason than most to insist that the ultimate reality with which man is concerned is personal."² And he goes on to remind us that Christians as persons consider themselves to be in touch with the Godhead who is also a person. One may wonder at this point how this view can be accommodated to the Muslim insistence that God is not a person. For in the central Islamic tradition God is not describable at all, whether by image or by sound.³ The pronouns by which he is referred to are grammatical, not ontological. He is thus literally unrepresentable.⁴

Smith believes that the adjective "religious," as opposed to the noun form, escapes the danger of reification because it refers to a quality. "We shall consider later the notion that human history might prove more intelligible if we learned to think of religion and the religious as adjectives rather than as nouns," he proposes, "that is, as secondary to persons or things rather than as things in themselves."⁵ I find it significant that his text makes no mention of adverbs. For whereas adjectives qualify—and therefore presuppose—substantives, adverbs qualify actions. The absence of any reference to adverbs in this context alerts us to the fact that Smith has little interest in action. This is an important feature of his approach on which I shall comment further.

The rejection of essentialism appears, therefore, to be qualified. There is, after all, something essential that the term "religion" has been used to identify: "In every human community on earth today," so we are told, "there exists something that we, as sophisticated observers, may term religion, or a religion. . . . *Man is everywhere and has always been what we today call 'religious'.*"⁶ So even while it is asserted that religion has no

² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³ Whence the Qur'anic chapter called *al-ikhhlās* (the declaration of God's perfection): "(1) Say: 'He is the One God: (2) God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All Being. (3) He begets not neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.'" I have used Muhammad Asad's translation (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980).

⁴ My point here should not be confused with the specific Mu'tazili doctrine that God was without attributes. (Mu'tazili were medieval Muslim theologians, described in Western literature as "the first rationalists of Islam.") I am interested not in abstract doctrines but in identifying the concepts in terms of which religious discourse and practice are organized. Thus the use of God's ninety-nine names (*al-asmā' al-husna*) should not be seen as pointing to divine things, but as seeking to draw humans to a divinely ordained life. According to this view, the question posed by the use of these names by Muslims is not whether they are correct representations of him; it is whether, and if so how, they engage the right bodily and spiritual attitude. The Qur'an, as God's word, requires reverential behavior (*waqār*) from humans but not worship (*ibāda*), since only God can be worshiped. But it possesses a quality that makes it more than the medium of a message. These remarks on Islam are intended as a warning that social ontology directly based on a specific theological claim is not useful for the comparative study of religion.

⁵ Smith, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18 (my italics). Curiously, the authority for this confident assertion is an anthropology that itself employs essentialist definitions of religion—exemplified by textbooks by Raymond Firth (*Elements of Social Organization* [London, 1951]) and William Howells (*The Heathens: Primitive Man and His Religions* [New York, 1948]).

essence, we are being asked to identify something called a religious condition. How is one to do this? In Smith's view this must be done by reference to something universal and transcendental he calls "faith."

In his frequent invocations of "history," Smith wavers between anti-essentialism (i.e., because the idea of essence precludes change, it must be rejected by a properly historical approach) and radical skepticism (i.e., nothing in reality is definable because it is too complex, too fluid, whereas our concepts are static). "The world of objective reality . . . is recalcitrant to our schematizations," he declares, "We may define anything at all, provided only that it does not exist. Once we are talking of empirical objects, our minds move from the neatness of rational intelligibilities to the more humble approximations of an awareness of what always transcends our exact apprehension—and, in any case, is changing even while we try to apprehend it."⁷ The doctrine here is an ancient one: that since our concepts seek to mirror the world, we can do so only by distorting it because the world is constantly changing and our concepts are not. The assumption is that only that which is unchanging is capable of being understood. But our modern epistemology is different. We recognize that natural and social knowledges are integrally connected with practices that intervene in, construct, and change the world. In the area of religious knowledge, we can see how the question arises among adherents as to which elements in the religious tradition are to be regarded as vital and which must be modified in order to maintain its continuity. The essence of each religion is thus not something unchanging and unchangeable but something that is at once to be preserved and defended as well as argued over and reformed in the changing historical circumstances that the tradition inhabits. And people are religious to the extent that they belong actively to developing religious traditions, preserving or reformulating them. I turn to Smith's understandings of religious tradition and faith below and consider their adequacy for the comparative study of religion. But first I want to examine briefly the notion of religion as reification, since that is a principle he uses explicitly for comparative purposes.

SMITH ON REIFICATION

For Smith, "faith" is the noun by which a religious situation may always be identified because, unlike "religion," it cannot be reified. I shall criticize this position—not because I want to say that faith is indeed capable of being reified, but because it is here conceived of as an inner state and not as a relationship created through, maintained by, and expressed in practice. (By practice, I refer here to activity that depends on the devel-

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–43.

oped capacities, the cultivated sensorium, of the living body and that, in its engagement with material objects and social conditions, makes meaningful experience possible.)

According to Smith, the concept of religion has evolved in the course of “a long-range development [in the West] that we may term a process of reification: mentally making religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity.”⁸ To say that religion is reified is to claim that something belonging only in the world of imagination is mistaken for something that exists in the real world. I take it that this is because, for Smith, personal piety, being an attitude of mind and heart, cannot properly be thought of as a thing. But if “thing” simply means a referent in the world, why can not personal piety be a thing? The trouble, I think, is that in one sense “reification” for Smith is assimilated to what Weber called the routinization of charisma. Thus, in commenting on the historical formation of Sikhism, he writes, “We have here a recapitulation of a standard gradual process of reification: the preaching of a vision, the emergence of followers, the organization of a community, the positing of an intellectual ideal of that community, the definition of the actual pattern of its institutions.”⁹ In brief, two ideas appear to be fused together in such uses of the notion of reification: that of a high degree of systematization in doctrine or practice, on the one hand, and that of mistaking a word for the thing it names, on the other.

Smith’s method of proving the presence of reification is to adduce counterexamples. Thus Hinduism is presented as the least reified and Islam as the most reified of all religions. “There are Hindus, but there is no Hinduism,” he observes. “My objection to the term ‘Hinduism’, of course, is not on the grounds that nothing exists. Obviously an enormous quantity of phenomena is to be found that this term covers. My point, and I think that this is the first step that one must take towards understanding something of the vision of the Hindus, is that the mass of religious phenomena that we shelter under the umbrella of that term, is not a unity and does not aspire to be. It is not an entity in any theoretical sense, let alone any practical one.”¹⁰ Smith’s concern is that Hinduism should be defined nominally not essentially. Hinduism is simply what Hindus believe and do. But my concern is that it is also, paradoxically, a heterogeneity that is celebrated as a singular “vision” attributed to a collective subject: “Hindus, on the other hand, have gloried in diversity. One of their basic and persistent affirmations has been that there are as many aspects of truth as there are persons to perceive it. Or, if some proclaimed a dogmatic exclusivism, insisting on their own version of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

truth over against alternatives, it was always on a sectarian basis, one fraction of *the total Hindu complex* affirmed against other fractions—not one transcending Hindu schema as a whole.”¹¹ The difficulty with this can be stated in the question: What defines “the total Hindu complex” other than an umbrella extending arbitrarily over a miscellaneous collection of discourses and practices? But, given that that is so: Who extends the umbrella, in what situation, and for what purposes? The game of defining religion in this context is a highly political one.

To answer these questions one needs to turn to the construction of specific historical narratives. Smith’s account of the Muslim presence in India reproduces, I suggest, the Orientalist narrative of Islam coming to India as—and always retaining the essential quality of—an alien force. “Never before,” he writes, “had an organized, systematic, and exclusive community carrying (or being carried by) what was in theory an organized, systematic and exclusive idea *arrived violently from the outside* to reject all alternatives and to erect a great wall between those who did and those who did not belong. A boundary between non-Muslims (followers of indigenous ways, ‘Hindus’) and Muslims was sharply drawn. Yet on the other side the continuation of such boundaries so as to demarcate off a ‘Hindu’ community from other Indian groups was not clear.”¹² Note that it is precisely because Islam is represented as a sharply defined object (a projectile?) and Hinduism as an indefinite space of heterogeneity that the former can be said to have “arrived violently from the outside.”¹³ My complaint, I stress, is not that Smith was biased in favor of Hinduism and against Islam. It is that his example of Hinduism as the very opposite of religious reification acquires its plausibility from the concept being constructed at the level of abstracted belief and not of the teaching and learning of practices, the historical setting of actions and their consequences, the growth and decay of institutions, and so on.

Yet Smith’s narrative needs to be attended to in greater detail because it is a presentation of the idea of religious differences in India that is by no means uncommon among people with a specific political agenda. Is it in fact the case that a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims was sharply drawn? This claim is made as though the question of who belonged to a religious community was fundamentally a cognitive one. But the question of a religious community’s boundaries is first and foremost a practical one. For people draw social lines, or oppose the attempt to do

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66 (my italics).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65 (my italics).

¹³ The previous Aryan invasion of south Asia, the expulsion of Buddhism from the peninsula, Brahmanic exclusivism in the conduct of religious reform, and the rigidification of the caste system—all of which occurred before the arrival of Islam in India—are not mentioned anywhere in Smith. Nor is the irregular and decentralized character of conversions to Islam.

so, in particular contexts and for particular purposes. The British certainly tried to draw such lines in their censuses for modern administrative purposes, but they obscured thereby complicated patterns of belief and practice shared among various local populations of Muslims and Hindus, as Peter van der Veer, Gyan Pandey, and other scholars have reminded us.¹⁴

Since the great majority of India's Muslims are the descendants of converts, they are not in any literal sense people who have "arrived violently from outside to reject all alternatives." It is not even the case that most of their ancestors were violently converted to Islam. But more important, the process of conversion is a complex one in which older experiences are blended or carried along in newer forms of behavior and understanding—as Gauri Viswanathan has demonstrated in her recent book on conversion.¹⁵ Even today the line between India's Muslims and Hindus is not as secure as Smith supposes, for the Vishva Hindu Parishad and Rashtriya Swayamasevak Sangh have begun systematic campaigns to "recover" recent converts to Islam from the scheduled castes—and even to lay claim ideologically to most Indian Muslims as being in origin, and therefore in essence, Hindu. Whether reasonable or not, all such attempts at marking off and rewriting social boundaries are just as much a feature of the Hindu community as they are of any other.

"This much, at least, is clear," Smith declares, "or can be readily shown: that the various religions of the world do in fact differ among themselves in the degree to which each presents itself as an organized and systematized entity. If this be so, then one of them may well be, must be, the most entity-like. One could suggest that Islam, it so happens, is that one."¹⁶ To say of various religions that "each presents itself" in a certain manner is to imply that each is a subject capable of self-presentation. One might have expected that Smith, of all people, would be aware that "Islam" does not present itself; it is named Muslims in specific times and places who express their understanding of a tradition

¹⁴ Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Gyan Pandey, "Which of Us Are Hindus?" in *Hindu and Others*, ed. G. Pandey (Delhi: Penguin India, 1993). See also Partha Chatterjee, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," *Social Research* 59, no. 1 (1992): 111–49, which describes how the concepts of Hinduism and Hindu are rooted in a familiar Orientalist narrative and how they are being put to new political use by right-wing nationalists in contemporary India.

¹⁵ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, N.J., 1998). In chap. 4 of *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), I analyzed the specific way in which Bernard of Clairvaux sought to utilize the secular experiences of his adult monks as a means of converting them—see esp. pp. 139–47.

¹⁶ Smith, p. 85. One wonders whether, having spent so long in India and Pakistan talking to "spokesmen" for Islam, Smith has taken them to be "Islam" presenting itself. At any rate, he has little interest in what Muslims in particular times and places actually do, how they live as Muslims.

they call “Islam.”¹⁷ He himself says as much later: “‘Islam’ could perhaps fairly readily be understood if only it had not existed in such abundant actuality, at different times and in different areas, in the minds and hearts of differing persons, in the institutions and forms of differing societies, in the evolving of different stages.”¹⁸ These contradictory statements appear puzzling, but on the whole Smith clings to the interpretation of Islamic history in terms of progressive reification.

I should stress that my primary quarrel is not with the accuracy of Smith’s historical picture. It is with the preoccupation that he and other writers have with “reification,” something I regard as unhelpful to the comparative study of religions, whether they are viewed in the perspective of history or identified in the contemporary world. The notion of religious reification is closely connected with a thesis that is now quite widely repeated but only half-formulated in Smith’s text: namely, that monotheistic religions are quintessentially intolerant. It is the sharply bounded, integrated, and totalistic character of monotheistic belief systems—so the thought seems to run—that makes them hostile to difference and jealous of loyalties.¹⁹ But apart from the fact that “intolerance” may refer to conduct or to creed, to legal discrimination or to popular hatreds, this thesis rests on careless thinking. It equates the concept of a unified doctrine (i.e., to be assented to or rejected as a whole) with the substance of that doctrine (e.g., strict monotheism as opposed to Trinitarianism, polytheism, atheism, etc.), and the two together are taken to be necessarily attached to a unified political authority that furthermore requires of all its subjects loyalty to that doctrine. Consequently, no attention is paid to the practices of polytheistic communities that generate intolerance, or of monotheistic believers who are tolerant—let alone to the variety of behaviors in which “tolerance” is expressed and lived. And indifference to the public expression of beliefs that no one really cares about is often taken to be equivalent to the toleration of beliefs that are regarded as offensive. In brief, those who propound the thesis generally ignore the fact that many polytheist or atheist societies have been highly intolerant of certain forms of behavioral transgression, while monotheist polities have often tolerated varieties of belief.

¹⁷ When medieval Muslim theologians such as al-Ghazali wrote works with titles like *Faysal at-tafriqa bayna-l-islām wa-zzandaqa* (The criterion for distinguishing between Islam and unbelief), they were not “reifying a personal faith” but defining what they regarded as the doctrinal and ritual basis of a community. Membership in a community, through commitment to the practical tradition that held it together, was considered essential to faith.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁹ The book by Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit entitled *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) is a highly sophisticated and often insightful exposition of this thesis, but I find its general conclusion about monotheistic intolerance unpersuasive. It seems to me to rest on an oversimple assumption of the relation between language and social life.

Thus Islamic religious history is a story of divergent interpretations, which have generally coexisted in a state of mutual acceptance. There were (and are) significant variations in the doctrines of the different Islamic schools of law—including doctrines directly defining toleration. For example, classical Hanafi law (which has historically prevailed in Muslim India and in the Ottoman Empire) treats the political bond between the Muslim prince and his subjects as contractual and primary regardless of the latter's religious affiliations. In this matter Hanafi jurists considered the religious beliefs and practices of subjects (whether they were animists, monotheists, or whatever) as indifferent. The life of a non-Muslim subject was entitled to the same protection as that of a Muslim subject and carried the same penalty in the case of murder or homicide. In contrast, the Hanbali school (which prevails in Saudi Arabia) considers religious status to be fundamental in the constitution of subjects (in both the psychological and the political senses) and, therefore, would not allow that nonmonotheists (i.e., other than Muslims, Christians, and Jews) could legally be subjects of the Muslim prince.²⁰ Such variations indicate why general statements about “the reification of Islam” or “the intolerance of monotheism” are less than helpful.

SMITH ON FAITH AND TRADITION

I now return to the idea of faith and its connection with tradition as expounded in the work I am discussing in order to introduce some ideas about religious practice. Smith identifies two dimensions in the life of “the man of religious faith.” The first has to do with his being in the world, “subject to its pressures, limited within its imperfections, particularized within one or another of its always varying contexts of time and place, and [to the fact that] he is observable.” The other has to do with the fact that “he is or claims to be in touch with another world transcending this.”²¹ But one may ask: Is it right to tie being and claiming so casually together? Surely, for the religious man or woman, the claim to be in touch with another world transcending this one is not necessarily like claiming to be in radio contact with Mars. At any rate, that is not what is interesting about the claim. The claim is interesting, I propose, because it suggests a way of being in the world that is different for him or her (and, therefore, for his or her speech and behavior).

What—as Wittgenstein would say—is the grammar of the term “transcending” in the claim “I am in touch with another world transcending this”? Actually, a pious Muslim would not use the word “transcending”

²⁰ Baber Johansen, “Conceptions of Law and Justice in the History of Muslim *Fiqh*” (paper presented at the conference “Shared Histories of Modernity,” Sabanci University, Istanbul, June 2–3, 2000).

²¹ Smith, both citations at p. 154.

but probably would echo the Qur'an and say, "I have faith in God almighty and in the hereafter (*al-ākhirā*)."²² However, the meaning of what may be translated as "another world transcending this" for a pious Muslim is to be found partly in what he says about the Qur'an, in his invocations of it when speaking to other Muslims, and in his behavior toward the book as "a sign from God" to his creatures in this world. Following Wittgenstein's advice, one should neither look for the sense of the claim "I am in touch with another world transcending this" in some evidence that might tell us how good a picture it is of an inaccessible world, nor attribute the sense to faith if that evidence is not forthcoming. Instead, one should look to its grammar—to the part it plays in a particular, active, social life where psychological "inside" and behavioral "outside" are equally (though in different ways) signified by linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviors that are publicly accessible. From this perspective the man or woman of faith is not a split subject (as Smith has it) living, on the one hand, in a pressured, imperfect, and particularized world and, on the other hand, always linked through his or her faith to another world transcending this. Faith is inseparable from the particularities of the temporal world and the traditions that inhabit it. If one is to understand one's own faith—as opposed to having it—or to understand the faith of another, one needs to deploy the relevant concept whose criteria of application must be public—in a language that inhabits this world. (This is not the same as claiming that all concepts must have public criteria.)

Smith's separation of "faith" from what he calls "cumulative tradition," his presentation of the former as something transcendently personal and the latter as its collective worldly expression, and his lack of interest in the formalities of worship and behavior render the difference between the man of faith and one who has no faith virtually unobservable. Any view of religious life that requires the separation of what is observable from what is not observable fits comfortably with the modern liberal separation between the public spaces (where our politically responsible life is openly lived) and the private (where one has the right to do with one's own as one pleases). The idea seems to be that one's beliefs should make no difference to publicly observable life and, conversely, that how one behaves can have no significance for one's "inner" condition. Such a view

²² The term *al-ākhirā* refers to the end of time and is often linked by the Qur'an in apposition to the temporal world. Thus: "Inn alladhīna āmanu walladhīna hādū wa-nnasāra wa-ssaābi'īna man āmana billāhi wa-l-yaum-il-ākhirī wa 'amila sālihan falahum ajruhum 'inda rabbihim wa lā khawfun 'alayhim wa lā hum yahzanūn" [Verily, those who have attained to faith, as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians and the Sabians—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve] (*Sūrat al-baqarah* [The Cow], 2:62; my emphasis).

prevents one from investigating how “faith” and “cumulative tradition”²³ form each other, and how the grammar of faith differs from one tradition to another. One cannot explore how the materialities of language—read, heard, written, uttered—fashion faith if its substance is to be considered no more than verbal expression. But if we are prepared to investigate how discursive and nondiscursive practices constitute the preconditions of faith among humans, we can ask how they contribute to the phenomenon of conversion, on which so much has been written. And by conversion I refer also to the change called “loss of faith”—not merely as an “internal” psychological state, but also as a radical reorientation of behavior, sensibility, and social life generally.²⁴

Occasionally, Smith seems to get near the idea that there are mundane preconditions of faith that are also historical.²⁵ But when he writes that “it is because the materials of a cumulative tradition serve as the ground of a transcendent faith that they persist,” he implies that the continuity of tradition depends on faith but not the other way around.²⁶ Thus, although he affirms repeatedly that “religious faith must eventuate in faith-inspired practice,” he never examines how practice helps to construct faith.²⁷ On the contrary, we are told emphatically that “my faith is an act that *I* make myself, naked before God.”²⁸ I have no difficulty with this claim as belonging to a particular language game. My objection here is that the sense it makes as such cannot serve as the basis of a universal definition of “religion,” something after which Smith still hankers. For, in other language games, faith is not a singular act but a relationship based on

²³ “By ‘faith’ I mean personal faith. . . . 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 the historian can observe.” Smith, pp. 156–57.

²⁴ “Faith,” Smith declares, “is deeply personal, dynamic, ultimate, is a direct encounter relating one . . . to the God of the whole universe, and to one’s Samaritan neighbor—that is, to persons as such, oblivious of the fact that he be outside one’s organized religious community” (ibid., p. 127). Smith insists that whether one agrees with this or not, “this is what *genuinely* religious people” believe, or, in other words, “those who believe in God, and *genuinely* have faith in Him, adopt this attitude” (ibid., p. 128; my italics). Thus, a metaphysical relation to God and an abstract ethical relation to other human beings are how faith articulates religiosity. But the content of those relationships remains empty.

²⁵ Thus, when he observes that the cumulative tradition “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,” he makes a promising move. However, in the very next sentence he goes on to insist that “*it neither includes nor fully determines that later faith*” (ibid., p. 159; my italics). This statement seems to me obscure at best.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 191.

continuous practice, a trusting attitude toward (not being mistrustful of) another.²⁹

This brings me to Smith's view of tradition. Tradition, he writes, "is not a unit. By the very words 'cumulative' and 'tradition' I have meant to stress that the concept refers in a synthetic shorthand to *a growing congeries of items* each of which is real in itself but all of which taken together are *unified in the conceptualizing mind*, by processes of intellectual abstraction."³⁰ The function of tradition is abstract for Smith in that it remains entirely mental, something that has nothing to do with practice, with the living body, or with materialities. "Ultimately again one comes back to literally individual persons," Smith reminds us. The cumulative tradition, he explains, is "a device by which the human mind may rewardingly and without distortion introduce intelligibility into the vast flux of human history or any given part of it."³¹ The tradition is thought of as a cognitive framework, not as a practical mode of living, not as techniques for teaching body and mind to cultivate specific virtues and abilities that have been authorized, passed on, and reformulated down the generations. Concrete traditions are not thought of as sound and visual imagery, as language uttered and inscribed (on paper, wood, stone, or film) or recorded in electronic media. They are not thought of as ways in which the body learns to paint and see, to sing and hear, and to dance and observe; as masters who can teach pupils how to do these things well; and as practitioners who can excel in what they have been taught (or fail to do so). Yet such matters cannot be separated from the force and function of religious traditions—and so of religious experiences.

When Smith writes that "the formalities of one's religious tradition are at best a channel, and at worst a substitute," he comes close to saying that anyone who insists on the indispensability of particular "formalities" cannot be accounted "genuinely religious."³² This, I would suggest, is in essence the missionary's standpoint. The missionary cannot re-form people unless they are persuaded that the formal ways they live their life are ac-

²⁹ At least this is, arguably, the case in the Islamic tradition where faith connects neither with the assurance of a kinship inheritance (as in the Old Testament) nor with the gift of a divine promise (as in the New Testament) but with commitment, under God, to the continuous practice that forms a community of the faithful. It is in this context that the Qur'an makes a crucial distinction between *islām*—the singular act of surrender to God—and *imān*, the process by which the Muslim, through obedience, develops a faithful relationship to God, his prophet, and fellow Muslims. "The bedouin say, 'We have attained to faith.' Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: 'You have not [yet] attained to faith; you should [rather] say, "We have [outwardly] surrendered"—for [true] faith has not yet entered your hearts. But if you [truly] pay heed unto God and His Apostle, He will not let the least of your deeds go waste: for behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace'" (*The Private Apartments*, 49:14).

³⁰ Smith, p. 168 (my italics).

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 169.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 128–29.

cidental to their being, channels for which other channels can be substituted without loss. And thus from one religion to another, or from living religiously to living secularly. Different practices are mere externals, at best only the means for receiving the essential message. Yet channels (how messages are communicated) do matter to what is communicated. This is why—to take one example—most nonmodernized Muslims would deny that reciting and listening to the Qur'an is simply receiving a meaning that could have been conveyed by other means. And this is why they hold that the Qur'an cannot be translated, only interpreted.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICE

My main argument with Smith so far has been that his residual essentialism leads him to ignore the materialities that form religious subjects. Two large areas of investigation are thereby ruled out: first, the place of practice and discipline in different religious traditions; and second, the nature of the mutual dependence and tension between “religion” and “secularism” as modern constructions.

In his far too brief section on the Middle Ages, Smith makes the following interesting observation: “even so careful a thinker as Aquinas would at different times apply the term [*religio*] to at least three different things: the outward expression of faith; the inner motivation towards worshipping God, and that worship itself; and . . . the bond that unites the soul with God.”³³ The implication that Aquinas is careless is instructive. Smith is so obsessed by the danger of “reification” (making a word into a thing) that he is oblivious of the opposite danger (making a thing into a word). He does not see that there are such things as structures of devotional practices, disciplines for cultivating religious virtues, and the evolution of moral sensibilities within changing historical circumstances. He dissolves these things into mere linguistic forms. It seems to me that had he paused to consider connections among what he calls Aquinas’s “three different things,” Smith might have identified them as aspects of a coherent existential complex and, thus, might have arrived at a concept that was central to medieval religious thought and practice. This also would have allowed him to trace the significant differences between the practical elements identified and translated as “religion” in various epochs and cultures. Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to some aspects of the Islamic tradition of piety in Cairo as described in two superb ethnographic studies by two young anthropologists: Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind.³⁴

³³ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁴ Charles Hirschkind, “Technologies of Islamic Piety: Cassette-Sermons and the Ethics of Listening” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999); Saba Mahmood, “Women’s Piety

Both studies are concerned with a tradition that is based on the idea of the soul that is at least as old as Aristotle and that has been absorbed into Judaism and Christianity, as well as Islam. This tradition requires us to attend not merely to the idea of embodiment (that human action and experience are sited in a material body) but also to the idea of ensoulment—the idea that the living human body is an integrated totality having developable capacities for activity and experience unique to it, capacities that are culturally mediated.

Although the living body is the object of sensations (and in that sense passive), its ability to suffer, to respond perceptually and emotionally to external and internal causes, and to use its own pain in unique ways in particular social relationship makes it active. Many traditions therefore attribute to the living human body the potential to be shaped (the power to shape itself) for good or ill.

Whether passive or active, the living body's materiality is regarded as an essential means for cultivating what such traditions define as virtuous conduct and for discouraging what they consider as vice. The role of fear and hope, of felicity and pain, is central to such practices. According to this view of the living body, the more one exercises a virtue the easier it becomes. By contrast, the more one gives in to vice, the harder it is to act virtuously. This is precisely how many Muslims interpret the repeated Qur'anic declaration to the effect that God seals the hearts of stubborn sinners. The punishment for repeated wickedness is to be the sort of person one is: someone who is unable to distinguish true speech from false, and divine speech from human speech—a person who cannot live the virtuous life that God requires of them.

Conscious intentionality typically is here seen as important only where inexperience or vice prevails, for it is in those conditions alone that the inertial resistance of the body, as well as its fragility, need to be addressed deliberately by responsible practice. Note that I speak here of virtues (*fadā'il*) and sensibilities (*ihsās*). Rites of worship (*'ibādāt*), whose regular practice is in fact necessary to the cultivation of the virtues and sensibilities required of a Muslim, do require the silent enunciation of one's intention (*niyya*) to perform the prayer (*salāt*), and so on, at the commencement of the rite. The *niyya* is therefore an integral part of the rite itself. *Imān*—usually translated into English as “faith”—is not a singular act that one performs naked before God. It is the virtue of faithfulness toward God, an unquestioning habit of obedience that God requires of those faithful to him (*mu'minīn*), a disposition that has to be

and Embodied Discipline: The Islamic Resurgence in Contemporary Egypt” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1998)

cultivated like any other, and which links one through mutual responsibility and trust to others who are faithful.

Both Mahmood and Hirschkind provide detailed descriptions of practices directed at the cultivation of Islamic conduct in which painful emotions—fear and remorse, for example—are seen as central to the practice of moral discrimination. In different ways, their accounts reveal that “virtuous fear” (*taqwa*) is regarded not simply as a spur to action but as integral to action itself. Apart from being necessary to the development of moral discrimination, the endurance of pain is considered to be a necessary means of cultivating the virtue of *sabr* (endurance, perseverance, self-control) that is itself basic to all processes of virtue acquisition.

Physical pain and damage to the body are not celebrated in the central Sunni tradition of Islam, as they are, for example, among the early Christian martyrs—nor does pain have the same role in its religious discipline. But forms of suffering are nonetheless intrinsic to the kind of agent a devout Muslim aspires to be. The most important of these is the universal experience of dying and death. The suffering generated by the loss of those she loves is shared with others through prescribed practices of burial and bereavement—although the entire structure of practices makes it more difficult for mourning women to achieve closure than men. Devout Muslims seek to cultivate virtue and repudiate vice by a constant awareness of their own earthly finitude, trying to achieve the state of equilibrium that the Qur’an calls *an-nafs al-mutmaʿinna*, “the self at peace.”

Penalties, whether emerging as incapacity from within the living body’s functions or imposed as punishment on the body externally, are regarded as a necessary part of learning how to act appropriately. This formative process is set within the Islamic tradition of mutual discipline: *al-amr bil-maʿrūf wan-nahy ʿan al-munkar* (literally, “the requiring of what is beneficial and the rejection of what is reprehensible”).³⁵ The individual’s acquisition of appropriate agency³⁶ and its exercise are articulated by responsibility, a responsibility not merely of the agent but of the entire community of Muslims severally and collectively. If religious behavior is to be defined in terms of responsibility, then we have here a case of behavior that acquires its sense not from a historical teleology but from a biographical one in which the individual seeks to acquire the capacities and sensibilities internal to a concrete tradition that is oriented by an eschatology according to which she stands alone on the Day of Judgment to

³⁵ The thirteenth-century theologian Ibn Taymiyya’s *Amr bi al-maʿrūf wa al-nahy ʿan al-munkar* has been reprinted in Jeddah several times since 1979, together with a long explanatory introduction by the modern Egyptian editor, Muhammad Jamil Ghazi (Jeddah: Matbaʿat al-Madani, 1992).

³⁶ I have dealt with some aspects of the concept of agency in a recent article: “Agency and Pain: An Exploration,” *Culture and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2000): 29–60.

account for her life. In this tradition, the body-and-its-capacities is not owned solely by the individual but is subject to a variety of rights and duties held by others as fellow Muslims. There is, therefore, a continuous, unresolved tension between responsibility as individual and metaphysical, on the one hand, and as collective and quotidian, on the other—that is, between eschatology and sociology.

In referring sketchily to aspects of Islamic corporal discipline, as recounted so richly in the work of Hirschkind and Mahmood, I do not wish to reinforce the old secularist prejudice that religion is essentially about fear of punishment. My concern is to argue that various questions about the connection between formal practices and religiosity cannot be addressed if we confine our perspective to Smith's—to what is in effect a pietistic conception of religion as faith that is essentially individual and otherworldly. We need to take fully into account the ways in which “indigenous psychologies” orient traditional practices in different religions at different times and in different places in order to examine some of the preconditions for religious experience and attitude—including what Smith identifies as faith. But in order to do that we have to abandon the idea of religion as always and essentially the same, and as dependent on faith that is independent of practical traditions because and to the extent that it is transcendental.

To define “religion” is first and foremost an act. To do so in terms of “belief in God” is to use an essence to circumscribe certain things as “religion.” But this identifying work is not done in the same way for (religious) experience, doctrines, behaviors, texts, songs, pictures, times, spaces, relations, forces, and so on. To define is to leave out some things and to include others. To stress the centrality of “God” in the definition is to exclude Buddhism; to stress the centrality of “transcendence” is to exclude immanence; and to stress the centrality of “belief” is to exclude practice without belief. And these definitions are not mere abstract intellectual exercises. They are embedded in passionate social disputes on which the law of the state pronounces.³⁷ My problem with universal definitions of religion is that by insisting on an essential singularity, they divert us from asking questions about what the definition includes and what it excludes—how, by whom, for what purpose, and so on. And in what historical context a particular definition of religion makes good sense.

THE QUESTION OF SECULARISM

This leads me to my second general point: Why should not the comparative study of religion include secularism? In one of the most interesting and original chapters of his book, Smith traces the emergence of the mod-

³⁷ See Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *Paying the Words Extra: Religious Discourse in the Supreme Court of the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

ern notion of religion in the West.³⁸ But he also insists that as a systematic entity “religion” was developed in the ancient world and then taken up by Muslims who spread it widely but injected into the West by Jewish and Christian traditions and eventually diffused by the West to peoples throughout the world. Smith thus takes it as axiomatic that the concept of religion in its ancient and modern forms are essentially the same—if only because it reifies religious reality.

I would urge that “religion” is a modern concept not because it is reified but because it has been linked to its Siamese twin “secularism.” Religion has been part of the restructuration of practical times and spaces, a rearticulation of practical knowledges and powers, of subjective behaviors, sensibilities, needs, and expectations in modernity. But that applies equally to secularism, whose function has been to try to guide that rearticulation and to define “religions” in the plural as a species of (non-rational) belief.

Smith has nothing to say about “secularism”—an ideology based on a grand historical narrative of progressive enlightenment that authorizes social and political life in determinate ways. Secularist ideology, I would suggest, tries to fix permanently the social and political place of “religion” on the basis of a number of metaphysical beliefs about “reality”: (1) that “the world” is a single epistemic space, occupied by a series of mutually confirming sciences—ranging from astronomy and nuclear physics to sociology and psychology—that not only employ something called “the scientific method” but also confirm it as the model for reason; (2) that the knowledges gained from these disciplines together support an enlightened morality, that is to say, rules for how everyone should behave if they are to live humanely; and (3) that in the political realm this requires particular institutional separations and arrangements that are the only guarantee of a tolerant world, because only by compelling religion, as concept and practice, to remain within prescribed limits can the transcendent power of the secular state secure liberty of belief and expression.

I do not want to criticize secularist ideology here. My concern is simply to urge that we explore some of the ways in which self-described

³⁸ Smith also has some insightful things to say about Qur’anic vocabulary (on pp. 110–15), but his remarks are vitiated by a characteristic obsession—to establish the growing importance of “externalities,” which he regards as evidence of reification: “One index that can be set up is that showing the relative frequency of ‘faith’ and *islām*, the one being the personalist and activist term and the other gradually more systematized and externalist. We have already seen that in the Qur’an the ratio between these is over five to one in favor of *imān*. In Arabic book titles until the end of the nineteenth century, *islām* slightly outnumbers ‘faith’ in a ratio of three to two. In modern times this ratio jumps to thirteen to one” (ibid., p. 115). The attempt to derive far-reaching semantic conclusions through simple word count is in general misguided. In this case it tells us nothing about how obedience to externalities (*islām* does, after all, mean “surrender”) is conceived of in texts from different epochs as being related to the attitude of faith (*imān*) that binds the faithful (*mu’minin*) to God and to one another.

“religious” persons may subscribe to all or part of this ideological structure no less than persons who are “irreligious”—and therefore, to inquire into how modern men and women of faith (as Smith would put it) may be “secular.”

The reason for doing comparative religious study is, I submit, more than academic. Let me quote finally from a recent book by the political theorist William Connolly:

The historical *modus vivendi* called secularism is coming apart at the seams. Secularism, in its Euro-American forms, was a shifting, somewhat unsettled, and yet reasonably efficacious organization of public space that opened up new possibilities of freedom and action. It shuffled some of its own preconditions of being into a newly crafted space of private religion, faith, and ritual. It requires cautious reconfiguration now when religious, metaphysical, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences both exceed those previously legitimate within European Christendom and challenge the immodest conceptions of ethics, public space, and theory secularism carved out of Christendom. I certainly do not suggest that a common religion needs to be reinstated in public life or that separation of church and state in some sense of that phrase needs to be reversed. Such attempts would intensify cultural wars already in motion. Secularism needs refashioning, not elimination.³⁹

In order to preserve secularism’s virtues without clinging to its vices—in order, that is, to respond creatively and therefore undogmatically to the diverse antisecularist tendencies throughout the contemporary world—we need the kind of openness that anthropologists ideally try to assume in their inquiries. In the case of religious movements in the part of the world I know best—the Middle East—there are certainly currents that are intolerant and destructive. But there are others that are different. These include movements that can be gradually assimilated in the form of political parties into the democratic processes familiar to us. But they also include developments that are creating new social forms for experience and aspiration that one hopes will help to reshape the idea of tolerance—tolerance neither as indifference nor as forbearance but as mutual engagement based on human interdependence. I think that for all the arguments I have with Smith’s book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, that is what he also wanted. For Wilfred Cantwell Smith was a writer of remarkable sensitivity, a humanist who continued to develop his comparative understanding of religion in suggestive ways right until the moment that he died.

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³⁹ William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 19.