
Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Tribute

Antonio R. Gualtieri
Carleton University

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was respected throughout the scholarly world for his important contributions to Islamic Studies, comparative religion, and theology of religions. Born 21 July 1916, he died in Toronto on 7 February 2000. He was 83.

An image that symbolizes the fundamental thrust of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's approach to the study of human religiousness was evoked by my first encounter with him. It took place more than five decades ago when I was at McGill University. Charles Taylor (later to become Canada's pre-eminent social philosopher) had already discovered Smith and urged me to hear this new and stimulating professor. We trekked over to Divinity Hall only to find that on that day the lecture was being given not by Smith but by Tim Buck, the head of the Canadian Communist Party. This seeming anomaly sheds light on the definition of religion and the approach to religious studies that were already operative in Smith's approach to the study of religion.

First, it revealed Wilfred's conviction that the heart of religion is not a reified, systematic entity encapsulated in doctrinal, sociological, liturgical, or ethical formulae. To these historical deposits he gave the name "cumulative tradition." Rather, religion (or, as he later came to prefer, "personal faith") at its deepest level is a quality of persons' lives. This living faith results from the participation of persons in a historical tradition in whose meaning they recognize cosmic truth and the values commensurate with it, and to which they commit

themselves. This insight applied to Marxist faith no less than to faith in the world's great religious traditions.

That image symbolizes a second important point. To understand the faith of persons who belong to a historical tradition to which one does not, it is highly illuminating to have its meaning communicated by those who are themselves participant in it. Accordingly, in trying to convey the meaning of communist faith to his students Wilfred invited the head of the Canadian Communist Party, first, to assist in the exposition and, second, to confirm or challenge an outsider's apprehension of the meaning of communist commitment.

Smith's subsequent work in Islamics and comparative religion are an articulation of what is implicit in that evocative image from half a century ago. Smith's dialogical personalism was also evinced in the structure of the Institute of Islamic Studies which he founded at McGill: half of the Institute's faculty and students had to come from the Muslim world, Smith deeming it academically problematic and morally dubious to make statements about the faith of others without their being present to confirm, reject, or qualify the interpretations about themselves.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Toronto, Wilfred proceeded with his wife Muriel MacKenzie Struthers (born in China of missionary parents) to the University of Cambridge. He subsequently completed his Ph.D. at Princeton University in Persian studies.

The Marxist perspective of Smith's first book, *Modern Islam in India*, written while teaching at Forman Christian College in Lahore, underwent revision as he lived through the tragic partition of India in 1947. He was compelled to acknowledge the centrality of traditional faiths like Islam and Hinduism in shaping history. His books on Islam, especially *Islam in Modern History*, not only interpreted Islam to non-Muslim, Western audiences, but also—as the translations into Arabic, Turkish, Urdu and Indonesian testify—helped clarify Muslim self-understanding.

In 1964, Smith went to Harvard University to serve as Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions. Partly in response to his disenchantment with certain currents in American society, he ac-

cepted in 1973 the position of McCullough Professor of Religion at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After five years, however, Harvard summoned him back to serve as Professor of Comparative History of Religions and to supervise the establishment of a university program in religious studies from the undergraduate to the doctoral level. In the tension between the proponents of religious studies and those hostile positivists who felt religion had no place in a university, Smith was the only candidate the conflicting camps could agree on.

In *Towards a World Theology* Smith assumed the mantle of theologian to address the question of how religious communities in a pluralistic world ought to articulate their truth claims in the face of the faith of others. As a minister of the United Church of Canada he gave leadership in helping formulate a new theology of religious diversity. Smith was convinced that the divine love revealed in Jesus Christ meant that God would also disclose his gracious presence to others through their own historical traditions.

Smith's scholarly achievements include thirteen books which have been translated into numerous languages, and scores of articles; president of major learned societies in religious and Middle Eastern studies; recipient of at least ten honorary degrees; editorial advisor to more than half a dozen scholarly journals; Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada; and visiting lectureships throughout the world. In January of 2000 his life's work was recognized by his induction as an officer into the Order of Canada. And perhaps most amazing: in the midst of these accomplishments, the home of Wilfred and Muriel Smith and their five children remained a place of conviviality and even sanctuary for students and scholars from around the world.

He was proud of his brother Arnold who had a distinguished career in External Affairs and served as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth; an attitude reciprocated by Arnold who once phoned me in excited pleasure over the extended references I had made in a television lecture to Wilfred's pivotal distinction between the concepts of faith and belief.

I owe my first teaching job to Wilfred's intervention. While I was away with my wife and children in Sicily writing my doctoral thesis,

Vassar College turned to Smith for his guidance on a religion appointment. So great was his scholarly stature that I was offered the job sight unseen and without an interview—on his recommendation alone. This was characteristic of the solicitous references he gave on behalf of many young scholars enabling them to win their first university appointments.

In the last weeks of his life Muriel occupied a nearby hospital room; his children of whom he was immensely proud, and their spouses, took turns keeping vigil at his bedside. His last words to me were spoken from his bedside one week before he died. Though in a highly weakened condition he managed three times to utter the barely audible words: “We still have so much to talk about.” Though weak in body unto death, his mind still sought out the intellectual path along which he had led a host of keen and inquiring students and friends for over half a century.