BOOK REVIEWS


The above title of W.C. Smith is a revised version of his *The Faith of Other Men* published in 1962. In the 'Preface' to this 1998 title, Smith explains his reasons for revising the title and some other matters pertaining to the change in its vocabulary and contents. The need for change in vocabulary was felt primarily because of the new gender sensitivities and the inadequacy of terms such as "other" used in the original edition in a world with much enhanced interaction between the different peoples of the world.

Smith also explains the main terms that he uses. For instance, he frequently uses the word "faith" and always uses it in the singular. "Faith", according to him, is an intangible expression of the whole being of a person, in the same way as "courage" is an intangible universal quality of human beings. Just as "courage" would be an inappropriate expression to identify the "courage" expressed by men or women of different cultures at different times, in the same way "faiths" would be inappropriate to describe the various ways in which people respond to the Transcendent.

In the 'Introduction' Smith poses "religious pluralism" as a characteristic of the present age which is likely to continue since he does not foresee many conversions during the coming hundred years from one tradition to another. Moreover, he expects increasing encounters among the varying traditions; and the consequent ferment within each group:

> It will become increasingly apparent, and is already essentially true, that to be a Christian in the modern world, or a Jew, or an agnostic, is to be so in a society in which others, intelligent, devout, and righteous, are Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus (pp. 23–24).

This new situation, in Smith's opinion, is a "challenge for us all to learn to live together with our seriously different traditions, not only in peace, but in some sort of mutual trust and loyalty" (p. 24). However, Smith's stance
on religious pluralism is not relativistic. "Modern relativism is sophisticated
cynicism and a devastating, not a constructive force" (p. 25).

Smith is a historian of religion. He therefore aspires to understand it at
two levels. First, by becoming well acquainted with the main facts
pertaining to that religious tradition of a religious community with its
customs, beliefs, rituals, doctrines, symbols, etc. Second, by understanding
the meaning of these beliefs, rituals and doctrines, in other words,
appreciating it, that is to say, to know, e.g. what cross means to the
Christians or crescent signifies to the Muslims. No one can fully appreciate
and fully identify with a tradition different from one's own, yet it is possible
to some extent to realize the significance of various symbols or dogmas of
other religious traditions.

Interestingly, Smith's position is different from John Hick's for whom
phenomenological and hermeneutical insight of religious traditions other
than one's own is possible. The difference of approach between Smith and
Hick may be due to their different academic interests and backgrounds.
Smith, as a historian, deals more with people, with their cultures, customs,
rituals. On the other hand, Hick is a philosopher and a theologian. He deals
more with religious notions, concepts, doctrines, dogmas, myths, symbols,
etc. significantly, the subtitle of Hick's An Interpretation of Religion is
Phenomenology of Religion.

The author devotes one chapter each to the Hindus, the Buddhists, the
Muslims and the Chinese, and the fifth chapter to noting the implications
of these chapters, and the last one to conclusions.

In Smith's view, people of different religious traditions cannot be
understood by simply studying their religious systems. Information in that
regard, according to him, is abundantly available in the various books that
have been written. But one should go beyond this information to grasp the
meaning of things that are crucial in each religious tradition such as its most
significant symbols. Smith proceeds by singling out one or two symbols of
each of the major religious traditions that could provide some clue to what
those symbols mean to the people belonging to that tradition.

In the chapter on the religious life of the Hindus, Smith picks up what
he considers a major symbol of Hindu religious worship, tat tvam asi,
which Smith translates as "that thou art". These words, in Smith's opinion,
express a profound religious experience. One may not be able to understand
the full implication of this expression, but one cannot deny that the
expression was formulated because some perceptive and outstanding
religious person wrestled with problems of life and finally came up with
this report of how he or she saw the universe (p. 39). For a Hindu, to
understand this phrase with utmost accuracy and sincerity is to be "saved"
or "liberated".
To understand the Buddhists' way of life, Smith selects the Buddh Shin Byn ceremony for boys held on their attaining teenage. This ceremony corresponds to the renunciation ceremony of the Buddha. The Buddha left the riches of the world to experience the everyday world of the common man so as to experience his sufferings and his frustrations.

According to Smith, this ceremony is a "symbol" containing deep meaning and significance and the "intimation of a transcending limitless truth" (p. 52). Yet one belonging to a different religious tradition cannot understand its significance fully, though to some extent one may appreciate it. Smith raises the question with regard to the Shin Byn ceremony: "What one means by speaking of the truth or otherwise of a particular religious orientation"? (p. 56). He answers:

I have long thought that one should not speak of a religion's being true or false simply but rather of its becoming true or false as each participant appropriates it to himself and lives it out. It is much too glib to say that "Christianity" for instance is true (or indeed, is false) without recognizing that my Christianity — or as I prefer to say, rather than using that gross and misleading generalization, my Christianness — may be more false than my neighbor's, or that so and so may be truer today than it was last Tuesday (p. 56).

A highly significant Chinese religious symbol, according to Smith, is the Yin Yang Circle. The description of the Circle in Smith's words is as follows:

The light and the dark are distinct, are in contrast but not in conflict. They combine to form a rounded whole. The form of each presupposes the other. The direction of each is towards the area of the other, but as it moves both move, in a rhythmic cycle of phased and balanced symmetry (p. 83).

Smith further adds:

In the yang-yin circle before us you might say there is nothing to correspond to the Western concept "God", or alternately, you might say that in so far as this concept signifies perfection, what corresponds is the circle itself, the whole, the symmetry, and balance, the perfection of various parts (p. 84).

Even in Taoism, which means "the way", the Yin Yang process operates. "The circle does not exactly correspond to the theistic God. The circle, in any case, is not a jagged or chaotic mess" (p. 85). Smith adds: "To represent totality as a harmonious perfection in movement is no mean affirmation" (p. 85). This circle expresses a dualistic character of the universe. Yang represents the good or good spirits and Yin the evil or the demons. The contrasting parts represent good. "The two halves of the
symbol, these are not good and evil. Both are good and further good lies in their due proportion. Evil is not the opposite of good, it is the absence or dislocation of Good" (p. 85).

The Chinese faith thus represents "dualism of complement rather than of conflict" (p. 86). This way of looking at the Transcendent is actually a kind of admission of religious pluralism by the Chinese. The circle accommodates a unity of approaches in which "both this liberal universalism and at the same time the exclusivist interpretation — the two in constant interplay" (p. 89).

As for Muslims, Smith chooses the mosque and the Shahâdah as the two most communicative symbols of Islam's simplicity and its uncompromising stance on the Unity of God (Tawhîd). "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" might seem like a "Creed" to the Westerners, but for a Muslim it is Shahâdah ("Witness"). The unity of God is so unquestionable for a Muslim, and so clear, that instead of posing it as a credal proposition, they prefer to bear "witness" to this truth for themselves and others. Calling it a creed is to distort its meaning.

Just as the symbol of Shahâdah in Islam, explains Smith, is not a credal proposition for a Muslim but an "unconscious premise", which "witnessed" immediately in every Muslim's proclamation of faith, similarly, Jesus Christ as the son of God, is an "unconscious premise" of a Christian. Smith elaborates:

The same kind of thing is true, it turns out, of all religious life. One distorts a Christian's faith, for example, by saying simply that he or she believes (italics mine) Jesus Christ to be divine, to be the son of God. Those concerned have over the centuries said rather that they recognize this — that these are the facts, and they have been fortunate enough to see them (p. 68).

The comparison drawn here by Smith between a Muslim's Shahâdah and a Christian's Christ, as Son of God symbol, is in my opinion totally inappropriate. A Muslim's Shahâdah does not follow an "unconscious premise" about God's unity. It rather follows a self-evident truth about God's unity. "Shahâdah" is witnessing to a self-evident truth such as God is one. Witnessing is at the empirical level, and a self-evident truth is known by intellectual intuition. To witness is to verify it through one's religious experience. In the case of Christianity, the Son of God symbol was used only as a metaphor by the early Christians which was made into a full-fledged credal proposition by the later Christians in the third century. This has been very well explained by John Hick in his Metaphor of God Incarnate (1994), Myth of God Incarnate (1977), and his other works.
In his chapter "Implications for Oneself and One's Own Community", Smith draws the implications at three levels of studying or understanding of faiths other than one's own. The first is the experiential level. One's understanding of the other's faith enhances and enriches one's understanding of one's own faith. The second is the theological level. Understanding of other community's doctrines helps find similarities and dissimilarities between one's own doctrines and those of others. This further paves the way for religious dialogue. The third is the level of interrelations, which is the moral one. At this level, understanding of others' faith makes possible concord, fellowship, reconciliation between different religious communities. Almost all great religions of the world value these objectives.

In conclusion, Smith attempts to draw some inferences from the fact of humankind's religious diversity itself. He emphasizes the need for comparative religious study which will satisfy both the academic and the religious interests. New ideas need to emerge and a new will and "constructive" efforts to meet the challenge of religious diversity in the changed scenario. Being an historian himself, Smith emphasizes the historical dimension of the phenomenon of religious diversity in the New World. This phenomenon needs the attention of all of us, to think about "the religious aspect of a new kind of world that alone can now be viable" (p. 109).

The last chapter titled "The Church in the Religiously Plural World" is addressed specifically to the Christians. Smith urges the Christian theologians, clergy, etc. to seek transformation in this "One World" scenario, keeping in mind that the Christian faith, and for that matter, other religious traditions have all along been "in a process", and are not simply "carriers of a pattern". The missionary movement, Smith believes, is in a state of profound crisis in the face of the challenge posed to Christian theology by the faith of others. At the intellectual level a new understanding of the religious phenomenon is growing and the new academicians are beginning to realize that the Christian questions regarding religious life are not the only questions, nor are the Christian answers the only answers. "The awareness of multifariety is becoming vivid, and compelling" (p. 129).

"Religious diversity", says Smith, "also poses moral problems because it disrupts community" (p. 131). The diverse religious communities need to collaborate to form a "World Community". Humanity must learn the new task of living together as partners in a world of religious and cultural plurality. Religion is capable of becoming the best binding force in the growth of world fellowship. "Coexistence, if not a final truth of human diversity would seem at least an immediate necessity" (p. 133).

Smith urges his fellow Christians as well as members of other religious communities to join hands in the attempt to promote understanding between
diverse religious communities and in the effort to appreciate the diverse ways of responding to God, or the Transcendent. As a Christian he emphasises that Christianity's message of universal love will become distorted if it looks at other communities as rivals. "We do not become truly Christian until we have reached out towards a community that turns all humankind into one total 'we'" (p. 134). Christianity, therefore, must come forward to end the differences and give up its old hegemonic approach.

Religious pluralism, as advocated by W.C. Smith and also by some other outstanding scholars such as John Hick and Paul Knitter, derives its legitimacy as a response to two thousand years of hegemonic Christian culture. Traditional Christian faith claimed to be the exclusive truth. The Jewish faith also claimed exclusivity on account of the self-understanding of the Jewish people as the "Chosen People". Traditional Christianity and Judaism fail to answer the religious concerns of the modern man. The new one world scenario presents a grave threat to religious exclusivism or inclusivism of Christianity and Judaism. In the presence of "other" religions, and with the new awareness of the religious thrust of these religions, both Judaism and Christianity are compelled to make accommodations. Religious pluralism is an appropriate alternative for them.

As far as Islam is concerned, it is not facing any significant challenge that would force it into modifying its stance regarding the ultimate unity of God, and Muhammad's status as the last messenger of God. This is because Islam never claimed to be exclusive. The Qur'an abundantly and repeatedly announces that it is the same faith of the earlier prophets that has been presented now in a clear and undistorted form. Judaism and Christianity have undergone much distortion on account of the unscrupulous and stubborn attitude of the Jewish race and the Christian clergy. This is admitted by scholars such as John Hick in The Myth of God Incarnate. Similarly, other world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. have also undergone much change, and worship of beings and objects other than God has made inroads into their belief and practice. The original message either became extinct or was grossly distorted.

Luckily the Qur'an was revealed at a time when humanity had matured and hence it could be preserved in its fullness. This does not detract from the fact that Islamic culture too has undergone much transformation due to vagaries of time, and on account of man's worldly aspirations. Yet the basic message, i.e. the Shahādah (there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God), is intact.

Now, the question and proposal of religious pluralism championed by W.C. Smith, John Hick, and others has a totally different significance for Muslims. Muslims do not see it as a serious challenge or a proposal of any significance because Islam has never claimed exclusivism. On the contrary,
Muslims believe that God sent guidance to all people. If people were to objectively and impartially assess the simple message of Islam — the Shahādah — they will be convinced that Islam is calling them to what is laid down in their own texts, i.e. submission to the one God. The Prophet of Islam (peace be on him) has only testified to that universal truth and called all men and women to embrace. It will, however, be inconsistent for any person to accept the unity of God and worship none but Him, and then reject the messenger who came to proclaim and reinforce that message. In my view, Transcendence and Unity of God were never doubted or opposed by any philosopher belonging to the religious camp. In fact the cosmological, the ontological, the theological, the pragmatic, and the moral arguments all point to the unity of God, and philosophers and theologians have vigorously argued for its truth. Hence it is not understandable why these philosophers had any problem with acknowledging the Prophet of Islam (peace be on him) as the universal divine messenger who witnessed the same truth and summoned all to witness it. If revelation is admitted as a valid mode of knowledge about God, then why does the proposition Muḥammad is the messenger of God (the second part of the Shahādah) pose any problem to any philosopher, especially to a religious pluralist.

The religious pluralist's stance leads, however, to a paradox. On the one hand some pluralists admit the truth and validity of all religions in so far as their object of worship is God, and on the other hand, the Muslims, like the believers of other religions, are asked to acknowledge the validity of other faiths that do not fully subscribe to the doctrine of the unity of God and that one may worship none but Him. Islam cannot compromise on the unity of the Absolute or the Transcendent because this is the very core of Islam.

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