Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 1

1-1-1987

Cantwell Smith's Proposal for a World Theology

Eugene Thomas Long

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Long, Eugene Thomas (1987) "Cantwell Smith's Proposal for a World Theology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil1987417

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

CANTWELL SMITH'S PROPOSAL FOR A WORLD THEOLOGY

Eugene Thomas Long

In *Towards a World Theology*, Cantwell Smith offers a new approach to the issue of conflicting belief claims in the world religions. He argues that most approaches err in considering religion in terms of belief rather than faith. He proposes a world theology of faith that requires persons to move beyond their particular traditions in order to interpret comprehensively the religious faith of human kind. I present Cantwell Smith's central thesis, analyzing it in terms of the relation between faith and belief. I argue that faith and belief are distinguishable but not separable and that to do what Cantwell Smith proposes would require an interpretive scheme or metaphysical theory that can be evaluated in accordance with its ability to make sense of the experience of humankind.

Western philosophers of religion and theologians have begun to focus anew on the question of conflicting belief claims among the world religions. More frequent encounters with persons of different religious beliefs, awareness of man's historicity with the limits that imposes on absolute claims to truth and a new sense of the interconnectedness of the histories of persons in the world have contributed to this development. Indifference to the issue is no longer a reasonable option and traditional solutions do not appear to be adequate. In a recent study, the historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, argues for a different approach to the question of conflicting belief claims in religion, one that emphasizes the role of faith rather than belief and one that would issue in a theology of comparative religion or a world theology of faith.

The key source for his proposal is *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, but he assumes in this work his earlier volumes entitled *Belief and History* and *Faith and Belief*.¹ Cantwell Smith's proposal for a world theology is very complex and requires careful analysis of a number of important epistemological and linguistic issues. I cannot presume in this essay to give adequate treatment to all of these issues but I do hope to present for discussion what I believe to be his primary thesis. He is not claiming to have provided us with a world theology, and he is not claiming that one person could. He seems more intent on provoking philosophers, theologians and historians of religion from different traditions to cooperate towards the development of a world theology of faith.

The expression 'world theology' is, I believe, intentionally provocative. A theologian is usually thought of as a person who articulates the faith of his community and whose work is judged in some way by the doctrines and creeds of that community. But here we have a proposal that theologians go beyond the boundaries of their own traditions, that they contribute to a world theology. It is clear that this proposal would be contrary to those that maintain exclusive truth on the part of one religion and to those that maintain that one religion is the fulfillment of or the norm by which other religions are evaluated. It also differs from proposals that would argue in one way or another that all religions are equally true, as well as from those that seek a syncretism of religious beliefs.

Cantwell Smith would argue that many, if not all, of these traditional solutions to the issue of conflicting belief claims suffer from the same difficulty. They are based on a consideration of religion in terms of belief rather than faith. His proposal for a world theology is based on an empirical claim, that man's religious history is fundamentally a history of faith, not belief. A world theology would be a theology of the religious faith of humankind and to this all religious persons are being summoned to contribute. Cantwell Smith is not, however, calling on Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and others to give up their particular traditions. He is calling on them to go beyond their particular traditions in order to interpret comprehensively the religious faith of persons throughout the world.

To understand his proposal we have first to understand his claim that the history of religion is fundamentally a history of faith, not belief. Cantwell Smith is aware that the distinction between faith and belief has a long history, but he believes that the distinction has been essentially lost in much recent history where the meaning of 'faith' has tended to converge with the meaning of 'belief' and the latter has shifted in meaning from the personal to the impersonal and the true to the dubious. When this happens, he argues, faith no longer means trusting and responding to the transcendent qualities in one's environment but means assenting to a series of dubious or problematic propositions.

Cantwell Smith speaks of faith in several ways but in each case he seems to have in mind what one might call an evaluative rather than a factual meaning of faith. He seems most intent on distinguishing faith from dubious commitment and "mere belief", but he also intends to distinguish it from belief that something is the case. It is one thing to believe that fairies exist and another to believe that tables exist. In both cases, however, belief can be distinguished from faith.

Faith in the evaluative sense has more to do with such words as 'trust', 'commitment', 'loyalty' and 'confidence' than with such claims as 'X is the case' or 'X is true'. The closest analogies to religious faith can be found in personal relationships where one speaks of having faith in one's friend or one's wife. If I say that I have faith in my friend, I am saying something other than I believe this or that about him, although I would say that such beliefs are at

least implicit in my faith. You might, for example, believe that my friend is untrustworthy and I might still have faith in him but it would be very odd for me to have faith in him and also believe that he is untrustworthy.

I will return later to the question of the relation between faith and belief. The important point now is that faith in the evaluative sense be understood to refer to a personal or existential attitude not to intellectual assent to a set of propositions. When Cantwell Smith speaks of the history of religion as a history of faith he is speaking of faith in this evaluative sense. From this perspective what separates the theist from the atheist is not that one believes to be true the proposition 'God exists' and the other does not (although this may also be the case). It is that one is committed to, trusts in what theists call God and the other does not. This is the insight suggested in Nietzsche's assertion, "That we find no God . . . is not what differentiates *us*, but that we experience what has been revered as God, not as 'godlike' but as miserable, as absurd, as harmful, not merely as an error but as a *crime against life*. We deny God as God. If one were to *prove* this God of the Christians to us, we should be even less able to believe [have faith] in him."² Cantwell Smith makes a similar point with regard to the Islamic tradition where he says that historically it was never a question of not believing in God. The infidel was the one who said no, who responded negatively to God whereas the man of faith said yes, committed himself to God.³

According to Cantwell Smith, then, religious faith is an act of loyalty or commitment. Sometimes he uses the term 'response' which suggests more clearly perhaps that he intends that faith be understood as more than a mere psychological state. Faith is a response or commitment to God, or more neutrally to some transcendent reality in human history. But religious faith is also said to be cognitive, to include some kind of understanding, discernment or insight. Recognizing the cogency of a logical argument, the goodness of a cup of cold water given in love, and the horrendous evil of *Auschwitz* are analogies given to suggest what is meant by religious discernment or insight and religious insight is said to be on a grander scale than any of these.⁴ At one point religious faith is spoken of as "an organising principle, by which the person is open to the infinite and is enabled to see all that is finite in relation to the infinite."⁵

Cantwell Smith seems to have in mind something like what Ian Ramsey referred to as discernment in disclosure situations. What is discerned or understood is not merely the particular facts or propositions but a depth which goes beyond the collection of facts or propositions. 'Things came together', we might say. We see things in a new way. Faith as insight is a total kind of insight, the kind that leads us to say that 'X is a good man' rather than 'X performs good actions'. Taking the example of *Auschwitz*, we might say that it is one thing to know all the partial assertions associated with it. It is another for the dreadful

horror to strike us in an overpowering manner. The discernment of religious faith would seem to be something like this except that it goes beyond to what concerns us ultimately.

Religious faith then, as Cantwell Smith understands it, is different from assenting to propositions that are held to be true. It involves discernment and commitment or insight and response in some total or unconditional sense. It seems fairly clear that this view of faith is an example of the so-called non-propositional or *heilsgeschichtliche* view. God reveals *himself* in history, not propositions to be believed, and faith is saying yes to God's presence in history. Faith is man's participation in God's history.⁶ But can we say more than this? Can we be more descriptive concerning this attitude of insight and commitment? In one place Cantwell Smith speaks of religious faith as "a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at more than a mundane level, to see, to feel, to act in terms of a transcendent dimension." In the same context he speaks of religious faith as a "quiet confidence and joy which enables one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event."⁷ Religious faith in this sense is contrasted with nihilism, with the inability to find significance in the world, the absence of mutuality, a total dependence on immediate events and a sense of alienation.

Understood in this way religious faith would appear to be some kind of ultimate or cosmic trust, a confidence that somehow, perhaps in spite of immediate events to the contrary, life makes sense. At times it sounds as if faith may be merely a kind of subjective ordering or "seeing as", but this is not Cantwell Smith's intent.⁸ Something is given, something is discerned and faith is a response. This would seem to suggest that Reality itself must have the sort of character that could evoke this discernment and response but this idea is not developed. Exactly what Cantwell Smith wants to say here is not clear to me. He wants to place religious faith in an ontological context but it is not clear to what faith is committed ontologically. Perhaps he would say that faith is a discernment of and commitment to ultimate reality understood as supportive and trustworthy, although he would want to remind us of the well-known story of the elephant and the four blind men from Burmah. In this story no one man apprehends the elephant as a whole and by analogy Cantwell Smith would argue that no one religious faith apprehends reality as a whole.

One additional point needs to be made about Cantwell Smith's understanding of faith and then we may look more directly to his proposal for a world theology of faith. Faith, as understood here, is not merely an individual insight and commitment. Faith is said to signify "that human quality that has been expressed

in, has been elicited, nurtured, and shaped by, the religious traditions of the world.⁹ Faith is said in some sense to precede and transcend the traditions in which it emerges but it is also said to be nourished and patterned by the tradition. Indeed in some traditions belief is said not to play the important role that it does in Christianity. While the primary expression of Christian faith has been conceptually in terms of propositions to be believed, this is not the case in all other religions. In some African religions, for example, a ritual dance may be the primary expression of faith. And in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, law, not doctrine, has been the fundamental expression of faith. Even within the Christian tradition the degree of importance of ritual and doctrine may differ.¹⁰

Historians can show, argues Cantwell Smith, that faith has been a relatively constant factor in the religions of the world and that there is much less difference between the faith of a Hindu, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a Muslim than there is between the various symbols and formulas by which faith is expressed. To speak of Hindu or Muslim faith is to speak not of their beliefs but of their discernment and commitment, of the coherent or meaningful pattern into which the various data of life fit. This concept of faith can provide the foundation upon which we can think globally about religion even when our traditions and beliefs differ. It is said that this global as opposed to particular reflection on faith is becoming possible today because the horizons of our particular histories are being expanded as a result of global communications.

Cantwell Smith is not unaware of many of the difficulties in his proposal. To the extent, for example, that faith is not belief and to the extent that it is an insight or discernment by which we see the finite in terms of the infinite, one community's faith is in principle excluded from being the object of another community's theology. Faith, he says, "can be theologised only from the inside."¹¹ This would seem to doom the proposal from the start. If one cannot without distortion undertake a theology of faith from outside a particular community of faith, then why should one propose the category of faith as the foundation of a world theology? At best, it would seem, one could do a theology of one's own faith while remaining agnostic about other faiths. This might represent an improvement over exclusivistic views but would hardly provide a basis for a world theology.

Cantwell Smith's answer to this problem is that we need to take more seriously the dynamics of historical processes. In our time of global communications historical processes are said to have begun that will allow us to go beyond the limits of our particular histories to a point where we can begin to talk about faith as more than Christian, more than Islamic and so forth. It is not a syncretism of religious beliefs that is being proposed but a theology of faith which would be greater than, more comprehensive than any particular faith. It is argued that this would be in part a recovery of something lost. For example, the early

Christians proclaimed that in Christ faith had become possible. This differs from proclaiming *the Christian* faith. The notion of the Christian faith or the Islamic faith as opposed to faith in a Christian or Islamic form is, according to Cantwell Smith, a relatively recent one. It was not until the nineteenth century, he claims, that we began to speak in terms of particular faiths and this happened at a time when faith came to be regarded as belief. Here is the root of the problem. Instead of faith in a Christian form we have Christian beliefs and these beliefs are set over against the beliefs of others. This, he says, was the first and not too successful effort of the Christian Church to deal with the new pluralism.

Cantwell Smith's historical point is that until recently faith was not thought of as Christian faith or Muslim faith but as faith in a Christian or Muslim context. It was only when the religious people of the world began to encounter each other that they began to speak of *the Christian* faith and *the Muslim* faith. And when they speak this way they actually mean the Christian *beliefs* and the Muslim *beliefs*.¹² Now, however, we are in a new era. Historical studies show us that religion has to do primarily with faith, not belief, and faith in a particular context not a particular faith. Put this together with the claim that today as a result of global communications we are beginning to see our particular histories as parts of a global history of humankind and we have his proposal for a world theology, "a theology for which 'the religions' are the subject not the object; a theology that emerges out of 'all religions of the world,' or I would say, all the religious communities of the world, or better still (incipiently) all the religious sub-communities of the world human community."¹³

Cantwell Smith is not claiming to have provided a world theology of faith. His primary aim seems to be that of getting his readers to look at the issue of religious pluralism in a new way. First we must think of religion in terms of faith and faith is universal, not particular. Faith does come to expression in particular contexts but just because of this we should think not of Christian faith or Islamic faith but of faith in a Christian or Islamic context. And from within these contexts we are encouraged to think universally and comprehensively about faith and thus contribute to a world theology of faith. "Theology", he writes, "is critical intellectualisation of (and for) faith, and of the world as known in faith; and what we seek is a theology that will interpret that history of our race in a way that will give intellectual expression to our faith, the faith of all of us, and to our modern perception of the world."¹⁴ It is not expected that theologians and philosophers will give up their particular traditions but that somehow they will transcend them in the direction of a theology of the faith of humankind. The data of his theology would be the data of the history of religious faith. It would be a comprehensive interpretation of the faith of humankind and such a theology should be in principle acceptable and cogent to all persons of faith.

"The task of theology is to make rationally intelligible the meaning of human life in faith, and of the world in which that faith is lived."¹⁵ Indeed the aim is to make faith intelligible to all persons both secular and religious.

In 1953 Alban Widgery, a philosopher of history and religion, published a book entitled *What Is Religion?* In this volume Widgery spoke of the tendency of many historians of religion to focus primarily on the beliefs and doctrines of the world religions and suggested the need for historians to return from doctrines to experience, to try to discover the experiences that led to the beliefs. Cantwell Smith is doing just this. He is pointing to the important distinction between what I would call experience of the transcendent dimensions in human history and the various images and doctrines through which we give expression to this experience. He has shown, based on a study of several world religions, that this kind of distinction is not limited to the western tradition. If this be the case then discussions of world religions that are limited to describing and comparing beliefs and doctrines may never get to the heart of the history of religions. Our belief systems are not themselves revelation. Rather they reflect our efforts to understand and interpret our encounters with the transcendent dimensions of human experience. Just because of this our formulations are always subject to evaluation by the experiences of the communities of faith. This accounts for changes which take place in our belief systems as a result of wider experience and critical evaluation. And this is why, according to Cantwell Smith, one may be said to be a Christian or a Buddhist to the extent that one participates in the historical process called Christianity or Buddhism.

At the foundation of all world religions, Cantwell Smith argues, is the experience of faith, a discernment and response to the transcendent dimension within human history. Faith in this sense is different from unjustified belief in a set of dubious propositions. It is also different from entertaining or believing the most probable hypothesis or set of propositions. Faith is not knowledge and it is not a second best substitute for knowledge. It is different from belief or knowledge in this sense. Faith, one might say, is an existential attitude of discernment and commitment in which the faithful is totally or unconditionally committed to the transcendent dimensions of human experience. Understood in this way faith is not reducible to some set of beliefs. Faith in God, for example, is not reducible to believing that God exists any more than faith in my wife is reducible to believing that my wife exists.

Cantwell Smith seems to me to be correct in distinguishing faith from belief and in referring to faith as the fundamental religious category. It is one thing, however, to say that faith and belief are distinguishable, another to say that they are separable. How Cantwell Smith stands on this issue is not always clear to me. I myself would argue that faith is distinguishable from belief, is not reducible

to belief but is inseparable from belief. Beliefs it seems to me are always at least implicit in faith. It is difficult, for example, to think of what it means for me to have faith in my wife if I do not believe that she exists, that she is steadfast in character and so forth. Certainly if I do not believe that she exists, it would make no sense for me to talk about having faith in her although I might have faith in some ideal. In a related way it would seem that at least implicit in religious faith is the belief that the object of devotion is worthy of my devotion. And if I speak of religious faith as an attitude of ultimate trust, an attitude in which I find meaning rather than absurdity in life, it would seem that I must then believe that Reality is trustworthy or meaningful.

The inseparableness of faith and belief is a crucial factor in our consideration of Cantwell Smith's proposal for a world theology. Faith comes to expression in different forms and faith is also connected with different beliefs, some of which seem to be in conflict. Even within one form of religious faith such as Christianity there are, for example, disputes concerning whether or not faith in this form requires belief that a transcendent being exists. The images and symbols in which faith comes to expression and is nourished are not authoritative in themselves. They direct us below the surface to the appearance of the transcendent in experience. But they are not merely evocative. They also intend to say something. To speak, for example, of God as king or husband is to point us towards some pattern of experience but it is also to express some belief, that God is like this. And this becomes more explicit in the more formal doctrinal or creedal statements. The issue is not one of faith or belief, experience or formulation, but of recognizing that the various expressions of faith whether vivid images or creedal formulations have no authority in themselves, that they must ultimately point us toward those patterns of experience that we call religious.

Perhaps Cantwell Smith would agree that faith and belief are inseparable if understood in the way suggested above. Perhaps he would also agree that the symbolic expressions of faith intend to say something, to make some truth claims if we recognize that they are not authoritative in themselves. If so, we still have the issue that he brings clearly to our attention, that our efforts to give expression to faith in vivid images and creedal formulations are rooted in our particular histories. To understand the symbolic language of Christian faith, for example, requires knowledge of that particular history and this sets limits to our ability to discuss religious questions across cultural lines. One could, of course, argue that every religion has its own language game and that the terms can be understood only in the context of the particular language games. Even such terms as truth are at times understood to be relative to the particular language games. But this is not Cantwell Smith's intent. In calling for a comprehensive interpretation of faith he is calling for persons to look beyond their particular histories and to contribute to a world theology of faith.

The fundamental issue, I believe, is that of finding a more universal or essentially self-interpreting language of faith, and this I am inclined to say is the task of what might be called philosophical theology. That is, if I want to try to make sense of the particular expressions of, for example, Christian faith, I will need to show how the expressions of faith can be placed on a universal map of man's experience of existence and being. This is important not only for communicating with other religious and non-religious persons, but also for deciding whether or not the beliefs implicit in faith can be justified. In other words, what is needed is an interpretive scheme or metaphysics in the context of which the particular forms of faith can be understood.

Is it this or something like this that Cantwell Smith has in mind when he speaks of world theology as an attempt "to interpret intellectually all human faith, one's own and others'; comprehensively, and justly?"¹⁶ I am not sure how he would answer this question. If we were proposing a rationalist type of metaphysical scheme in which one attempts to grasp the transcendent in rational terms, it is clear that he would have reservations. But if we understand interpretive scheme to refer to efforts to show that religious faith issues in a world view or metaphysical theory which may be judged true or false in accordance with its ability to make sense of the whole range of the experience of humankind, then it might be more acceptable to him. Whether or not there could be one such comprehensive interpretive scheme seems to me to be questionable. At a minimum any comprehensive schemes that are proposed would have to be open-ended, subject to correction by ranges of experience not adequately treated. And we would have to keep in mind that the interpretive schemes are not authoritative in themselves, that in some sense they always refer us back to human experience in relation to which they can be evaluated.¹⁷

University of South Carolina

NOTES

1. *Towards a World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981); *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977).

2. Walter Kaufmann, Editor and Translator, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p.627. From *The Anti-Christ*, Section 47. Expression in brackets added.

3. *Faith and Belief*, p.40.

4. *Faith and Belief*, pp.159-60.
5. *World Theology*, p.110.
6. *Faith and Belief*, p.140.
7. *Faith and Belief*, p.12.
8. *World Theology*, pp.82-83.
9. *Faith and Belief*, p.6.
10. *Faith and Belief*, pp.14-15.
11. *World Theology*, pp.111.
12. *World Theology*, pp.117ff.
13. *World Theology*, p.124.
14. *World Theology*, p.125.
15. *World Theology*, p.128.
16. *World Theology*, p. 152.
17. Elaboration of some of these comments can be found in my "Experience and the Justification of Religious Belief," *Religious Studies*, 17, pp.499-510.