OBJECTIVITY, SUBJECTIVITY AND BEYOND: AN EXCHANGE WITH W. C. SMITH

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OBJECTIVE FACTS

Part of the problem in interpreting Smith within the framework of the subject-object polarity is that the term objective is used in various senses which are not always carefully discriminated. Thus objective knowledge may be, in the first place, knowledge of objects construed as external facts or things. As such, Smith argues, it is an inappropriate category for the knowledge of persons who are not things but conscious agents who assign meaning to facts. In this sense, Smith's argument seems to be almost trivial—but only because his own contribution to the study of religion has made it commonplace.

Respecting this first sense of objectivity as knowledge of external objects arrived at by an epistemological approach that looks upon them as neutral, impersonal things, I believe Smith's critique is in the main incontestable. As early as 1968 in "What is Comparative Religion Comparing?" I was a convert to Smith's view that the proper study of humankind's religiousness is the meanings ascribed to religious facts, meanings that are at the same time the meanings ascribed to gods, human, history, and nature.

I feel sometimes that in Towards a World Theology (hereafter, TWT) Smith is still fighting a battle which he long ago won, namely, the

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characterization of the proper or at least final end of religious studies as the understanding and the delineation of personal meanings of traditions.

According to this position, the object of my study cannot be simply the cataloguing of externalia, but the acts of consciousness in which devotees use their traditions to express their selfhood and to apprehend the nature and quality of the real world in which they live. It is true that the participants have a privileged position in that their consciousness is the primary datum of investigation. But I claim that my job—were I able to qualify for it—is to seek to understand this religious consciousness in which the cosmos is grasped and selfhood expressed through symbolic mediation.

To put the matter in the language of contemporary debate about the moral rightness of 'appropriation of voice': I am entitled, nay obligated, to appropriate the cultural and psychological reality of others. But, this only with certain reservations. The first relates to Smith’s principle of verification: my statements about the faith of others are intellectually valid only if in them the persons about whom they are made can recognize themselves. The second reservation arises out of the provisional character of all our assertions about the personal quality of faith. To this we shall return briefly.

In seeking to understand and exposit Smith I have never relied much upon the category of corporate critical self-consciousness as an interpretive key, which is probably obtuse on my part given the importance that Smith seems to attach to it. Self-consciousness seems a somewhat arcane way of saying what Smith has insisted upon since at least the McGill University Inaugural lecture. Consciousness of consciousness crystallizes out as awareness of and focus upon meaning.

The corporate aspect of self-consciousness appears at times to be nothing more than the integration of the outsiders’ perception of external facts (or objects), and the insiders’ perception of the personal meaning of those facts. Respecting our scholarly knowledge of the Madurai temple, for example, the ideal is the combination of the critical observer's externalistic, objective apprehension with the devotees’ self-consciousness of what the temple means to them as ‘temple.’ I quote Smith at length in support of this thesis:

True knowledge of the temple as a human institution, as a reality in the life of several million persons, must incorporate its role in the consciousness of worshippers within it as well as of critical observers on the outside, in so far as each is valid. The insider, if dedicated to full knowledge, full self-consciousness, must and ideally will incorporate into his or her awareness the truth that outsiders see, so far as it be true; and the external observer, if resolute to attain to true