ON TOWARDS A WORLD THEOLOGY

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For Wilfred Cantwell Smith, to understand religion is to understand—transculturally and critically self-consciously (TWT, 60)—what he considers to be constitutive of our full humanity (e.g., 51). His data come from all of religious history, seen 'whole' so far as possible, but seen from the perspective of participants in one or other religious tradition, not from "outside" or somehow from "above" (44, 49). Through such understanding, Christians are expected to become more Christian, Buddhists more Buddhist, humanists more humanist, and so on. They become such by discovering the cross-cultural currents in the one river of life which moves us all along (26).

The philosophical inspiration for Smith’s foundational contrast between cumulative tradition and personal faith is Buber’s classic conception of Ich und Du (40, 143). In Towards a World Theology, however, as I shall point out, Smith’s mature position echoes themes more often associated with Hegel or Whitehead (37, 193). It remains to be seen how successfully he holds the two strands together—the personalist/existentialist and the holistic/evolutionary—in his accounts of the humane and transcendent, i.e., the terms which, with faith, prove key

1 The following is a revised version of my contribution to a symposium on subject and object in W. C. Smith’s recent work, held at the 1992 Canadian Learned Society meetings in Charlottetown, PEI. My assignment was to reflect on the theological direction being taken by Smith. In this paper I discuss only Smith’s mature thought as exemplified in Towards a World Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981). Unless otherwise indicated, page references in this paper are to this work, alluded to hereafter as TWT.

2 I have discussed Smith’s other work in Studies in Religion 10/1 and Journal of the American Academy of Religion 50/1.

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to his conception of religion. How does his increasingly theological thrust, we may reasonably ask, sit with the objectivity expected of historians of religion? Granted that his essay is only towards a theology, and not systematically theological, what kind of theology might he be moving us towards?

The focus for what follows is on hermeneutical questions raised by Smith’s discussion of symbols, as these bear on his call to go beyond subjectivism and objectivism in discerning religious truth. It also focuses on one version of the idealist tradition in philosophy, as modified in theology by Tillich, as indicative of the kind of background in philosophy and theology against which Smith’s proposals may be viewed. Smith does not claim to have studied Buber or the other figures mentioned in this paper. But over the years he has engaged in vigorous dialogue with those who have; and we see the echoes of their thought in the directions his thinking takes. I begin with remarks on his position concerning the symbolic or metaphorical uses of language and the juxtaposition of history and myth in religion.

I

Near the opening of *Towards a World Theology*, we find this fairly typical pronouncement:

> What all Christians have in common is that they have shared a common history. . . . They have in common also . . . something transcendent. Yet to say in words what that transcendent really is—the Real Presence, Christ, God; or to say that the Church in whose on-going life they variously participate, is itself the body of Christ; or however one conceptualise it—is to employ formulations that in turn are themselves not transcendent, and that are historically not stable. (TWT, 5-6)

Smith then goes on to illustrate the cross-cultural nature of our common history with the story of St. Josaphat, *aka* the Buddha, and the example of the rosary. With the latter he stresses our “deep human capacity to symbolise” and observes, concerning use of the rosary, that its history exemplifies “a process of change of symbolisation, not merely across religious boundaries but within them” (TWT, 13).

Let me immediately applaud here the focus on stories as contexts of religious symbols (cf. TWT, 36) and the emphasis on hard historical data as a way of keeping our feet on the ground when talking of essentially spiritual movements in history. Movements, rather than systems of ideas or social institutions, I would also agree, are where we should look for signs of living faith (e.g., 24, 35, 156). As Smith stresses, our concern