WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH
AND THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION

The inception of this paper came from a 1987 conversation with Huston Smith, one of the leading spokespersons for the perennial philosophy, who was interested in knowing wherein he agreed or disagreed with the thought of Wilfred Smith. He knew he shared similar concerns, and was in hearty agreement with the majority of Wilfred’s academic directions. Yet he felt a note of divergence that he was not precisely able to articulate. The purpose of this paper is to articulate both the commonality and divergence.

The phrase “perennial philosophy,” borrowed from Leibnitz by Aldous Huxley in his Perennial Philosophy, refers to “the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent ground of all being.” Since Huxley’s publication of 1945, the perennial philosophy has been a source of controversy. Some found it spiritually enlivening to consider the idea of a common Reality, that saintly representatives of the religious traditions may have been in contact with. Huxley had acknowledged of course that one could not find a common language, nor

\footnote{1 Quoted in Huston Smith, Beyond The Post-Modern Mind (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1989), 47.}

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an identical conceptual scheme, but rather something suggestively analogous in both doctrine and mystical experience that mystics haltingly attempted to express in language. A philosophy that expressed similarity of saintly transformation and a degree of conceptual resemblance across mystical traditions was widely cheered by those hoping to have an easy universalism.

It was of course not to be. Robert Zaehner convincingly showed that Huxley (not a specialist in comparative religions) had blurred distinctions between quite separate types of mystical experience, especially between nature mysticism and unitive mysticism of the advaita sort. Others distrusted the decontextualizing of mystical experience, and insisted that attempts to discover analogous religious experiences were epistemologically unwarranted, that the ground for comparison across cultures was weak given the fact that religions functioned as cultural wholes, and that terms and experiences from one whole were misunderstood when compared with others.

Huston Smith acknowledged these criticisms, but nevertheless rejected them (although he accepted Zaehner's clarification between nature and unitive mysticism) and aligned himself with perennialists like René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and especially Frithjof Schuon. In doing so, he argued that in scholarship legitimate intentions exist both to illuminate difference and to recognize similarity. However, the philosophical task consists in unifying when possible so that distinctions that are not significant should not overrule more significant agreement.

The obvious problem the claim of unanimity must face is the differences that traditions also display. Some thinkers are so occupied with these differences that they dismiss claims of commonality as simply sloppy thinking, yet identity within difference is as common an experience as life affords. Green is not blue, yet both are light. A gold watch is not a gold ring, but both are gold. Women are not men, but both are human. Everything turns on what foot one comes down on. And as that cannot be decided by logic, we need to bring in content to determine which "foot" deserves to be emphasized.²

It will be noted that Huston Smith understands himself essentially as a philosopher who, also being an historian of religions, finds in the earth's religious traditions food for thought for the philosophy of religion. H. Smith's earlier The Religions of Man. (1958) now desexed as The World's Religions (1991), was appreciated by W. Smith as:

² Ibid., 51.