A PERSONAL PREAMBLE

Many years ago a fellow Tibetologist and historian of religion had sent me a review article written by him on The Meaning and End of Religion, authored by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a name which did not mean anything to me—yet. I still lived in Germany, and the theoretical work of North American scholars rarely made it across the Atlantic. The review took offense at W. C. Smith’s stance that the believer has a role to play in the definition of the research subject taken from a religious context. In its largely negative mood the review provoked me to read the book. Reading The Meaning and End of Religion truly opened new vistas on how one could understand the beliefs of other people. I was mesmerized by the humaneness, the openness, the humility I found in this book. Here, I felt, was a way out of what I considered to be the restraints of nineteenth century philolology. My frustration with the staleness of the academic inquiry had found an end. I decided to write a letter to the unknown author whose views I found so intriguing and stimulating. W. C. Smith invited me to the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in St. Louis. Attending the conference was an eye-opening experience. The apparent absence of colonial arrogance in the North-American academy impressed me deeply. When the opportunity came, I gladly left the continent behind me. Thus, I am


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truly grateful that as a participant of this symposium I have an opportunity to acknowledge publicly what I owe to Wilfred Cantwell Smith. He has initiated my mutation from a philologist and historian of Asian literatures to a student of religion and he has shaped my thinking in a very profound way. My contribution is intended to express my indebtedness, my gratitude for meeting the man and his work.

My inquiry orbits around such concepts as God, the divine, faith, and it tries to bring them into a dialectic discourse with Buddhism. As the person who orchestrates this discourse I am situated in the post-modern context of critical theory, that is to say, I do not privilege one stance; rather I am attempting to open fissures, to point at gaps which may open possibilities for further discourse.

The following discussion is certainly inspired by W. C. Smith's insights but at the same time tries to go beyond it. In Faith and Belief, W. C. Smith takes up a notion widespread among Western scholars of Buddhism, that is, that Buddhism is, or at least was in its earlier phases, a religion denying the existence of God/gods, and which, for this reason, deservedly may be called atheistic. Smith comes to the conclusion that this is not quite so.

First, I would like to reflect on the claim that Buddhism is atheistic by examining what the Buddhist texts say about this issue, how Buddhists respond to the claim, and how it may be understood within our own context.

Buddhist texts throughout the ages contain passages which record the doings of deva, a Sanskrit word etymologically connected to the Latin deus from which the English words divine, divinity, and deity are derived. Commonly, deus is considered to be the equivalent to English god/God. In the earlier texts of Buddhism the common gods of India are mentioned: Indra, Brahma, etc.; in later texts Vishnu, Skanda, Shiva, and others displaced the earlier gods—as it happened in other Indian belief systems too. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana texts of Central Asia, indigenous gods figure prominently side by side with the imported Indian gods. Many references are found in the texts affirming the existence of gods in this universe. From these observations it would seem unreasonable to claim that Buddhism is atheistic if there were not the rejection of the

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