When I was approached by the organizers of this conference and asked to present a paper in honor of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, I wondered what I could possibly say regarding his work or his contribution to the understanding of religion. What did my current study of Gaṇeśa, the pot-bellied, elephant-headed god of Hinduism, and the work of W. C. Smith have in common? I was uneasy with the combination. Secondly, unlike everyone else gathered at this forum, I did not have an anecdote to narrate in the context of a personal association with W. C. Smith. I had never really met him. When he first started publishing books (around 1959), I was only eight years old and by the time I began my undergraduate work, many of his “ground breaking” ideas had become simply “givens” in the field of Religious Studies. My first task was therefore to review some of Smith’s fundamental assumptions which have come, aptly or inaptly, to inform the study of religion and, secondly to determine how these assumptions could be brought to bear on the jovial, good-natured Gaṇeśa.

In The Faith of Other Men, Smith argues that we can know a good deal about religious systems and still fail to understand the people whose life they involve. He suggests instead that we focus on the meaning of religion and he insists on the paramountcy of the inner state, the faith, as opposed to the outer form, the belief, the gods, the rituals, the doctrines

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that inform religious life. Smith keeps reminding us that religion is a human endeavour: it is lived, experienced, personally encountered. As a student of religion, I am predictably sympathetic to the concern that religion be studied as a human phenomenon rather than a matter of doctrines or ritual formulae. That these latter have a capacity to appear static and dead, easily dissected and dismissed in the laboratory of Religious Studies theory, is abundantly clear.

Smith is not alone in cautioning us of the tendentious dangers of the theoretical lens. In his case, it is the identification of the fundamentals of a particular tradition without any first-hand experience of the meaning of that tradition for its adherents which is the primary problem. It may indeed be possible for a scholar to state the meaning of a faith in modern terms, for a modern audience, more successfully than a believer. However, we must remember that though an academic eye is sometimes illuminating, it can also be concealing. Since it also seems true that we cannot (probably even ought not) see a tradition, in my case Hinduism, through Hindu eyes, we must nevertheless constantly assess our own vantage point, our own discourse and our own sets of assumptions in any analysis of that religion. We must indeed filter our data, employing in that task all of the means of social scientific theory and methodology available to us but we must be vigilant in so doing. Like Smith, I am convinced of the value of encountering a tradition face-to-face. The results of such an encounter and the implications for theory and methodology can be informative; they can also be shattering.

At the same time, I am not entirely sure that symbols and doctrinal formulas function to induce and sustain what Smith calls the "transcendent unobservable faith of the participants." Nor for that matter am I convinced that the outer forms of religion, the external symbols, icons, formulas, or rituals function primarily as occasions for faith and then only insofar as people actually see, feel, and act in terms of a transcendent dimension. Even though Smith's concept of faith is wide-ranging and personal, I am uncomfortable with the term itself and suspicious of what lurks beneath it. In the context of this forum, it is the

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2 During the past fifteen to twenty years scholars have focused on the manner in which a particular theory is capable not only of framing one's data but also of generating its own data. See, for example, Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
3 Faith and Belief, 17.
4 Ibid. 12.