

# FAITH AS *THE* BASIC HUMAN QUALITY

HENRY L. NOVELLO

THE CONCEPT of faith in our secularist society tends to be understood as a distinctly religious category. We commonly regard believers as persons who have faith and non-believers as those who have no faith. But this way of thinking displays a lack of appreciation for the fact that faith belongs universally to humankind. A number of recent studies have shown that all people embrace some type of faith to carry them forward and to enable them to realize meaning in their lives. R. Pannikar, for example, claims that faith is constitutive of the human person (Pannikar, 1979, 190); James Fowler asserts that faith is ‘a feature of living, acting, and self-understanding, of all human beings whether or not they would claim to be ‘religious’ in any traditional way’ (Fowler, 1980, 17); and David Tracy associates human authenticity with a position of faith understood as a fundamental commitment to the ultimate significance of human existence (Tracy, 1975, 8). It is in light of such recent studies on faith that Dermot Lane asserts, ‘The real issue today about faith is not whether one has faith but rather what particular kind of faith one has’ (Lane, 1981, 65). Lane conveniently refers to this type of faith as ‘primordial faith’ so as to distinguish it from the explicit form of faith which we call ‘religious faith’ (Lane, 1981, 64).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his analysis of faith as a universal phenomenon holds to a similar distinction to that made by Lane when he talks about a ‘generic faith’ (Hughes, 1986, 37–40) that operates in all the religions of the world. Many scholars have written on the issue of faith of late, but this essay cannot possibly delve into the many writings on this topic. Instead, it will focus on the thought of one

major contributor to the fundamental issue of faith, namely, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as analysed by Edward J. Hughes in his *Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Theology of the World*. Smith has formulated a very rich understanding of faith and the first part of this essay will critically discuss key aspects of Smith’s comprehensive conception of faith. The second section will then highlight Smith’s understanding of the opposites to faith and the ever-present danger of the perversion of faith. Of particular significance in the second part will be the helpful distinction that Smith makes between ‘negative secularism’ and ‘positive secularism.’

## *Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s Understanding of Faith*

The forces of science, economics, and communications are all working together today to produce a global civilization, but Smith believes that a global community cannot be arrived at without a programme that facilitates global religious inter-understanding. The value of a religious outlook on life is that it offers the possibility of overcoming tribal interest, individual self-centredness, and it has the capacity to survive disappointment in working towards a world-wide community (Hughes, 1986, 5). In order to achieve his task, Smith seeks to discover a unifying thread that runs through the manifold religions of the world. He does not find this thread in doctrine (what he refers to as ‘belief’ which is part of the ‘cumulative tradition’) for clearly doctrinal divergences amongst the religious communities are too large to provide any significant degree of unity, hence Smith pursues a unifying thread

in what he calls 'faith' (Hughes, 1986, 7).

It is important to appreciate the fundamental distinction that Smith makes between faith and belief. The former refers to the inner, existential, and experiential dimension of religion which serves as the foundation of a religious tradition, while the latter is a secondary conceptual expression of the primary experience of faith (Hughes, 1986, 10). This is very similar, note, to Karl Rahner's portrayal of knowledge of God as a 'transcendental' knowledge; that is, the view of the religious dimension of human existence as implicit in everyday human experience—there is an openness to the absolute in human existence and when this enters human consciousness the implicit becomes explicit and is conceptualized as knowledge of God (Rahner, 1978, 52–55). It could be said that God is immediately present to humankind in the order of being and mediately present in the order of knowing. Transcendental experience refers to that which is given antecedently, that which is already there ahead of us and is other than us, that which precedes the perceiving subject and is present in all ordinary or primary experience, and that towards which we are intentionally directed. Notwithstanding this similarity of thought between Smith and Rahner, in the writings of Smith we find a richer analysis of faith and how the many aspects of faith are interrelated to produce a complex phenomenon.

In the writings of Smith the primary experience of faith refers to a number of interrelated aspects of the religious life.

(1) First, faith as a capacity for ultimate meaning refers to our ability to orient our lives to a symbolic vision of reality that transcends mundane facts (Hughes, 1986, 7). Fundamental to the thought of Smith is the portrayal of the human as a self-transcending being who is referred beyond itself to ideals of value that make demands upon us. Reality is affirmed as having a symbolic character, which is to say that it 'works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define' (Dulles, 1983, 131).



*Dr Henry Novello is an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Humanities (Department of Theology), The Flinders University of South Australia.*

We humans do not come into this world ready-made but must put our lives together by interacting with the world around us. The experience of the human being is the experience of being still in the making, of having the capacity to rise above the given situation, of being open to a yet unknown future that beckons us, of being inspired by values that are considered worthy of being pursued because they render our lives meaningful and significant.

(2) Second, faith is a response to transcendence. The term 'transcendence' is Smith's term for ultimate reality, which includes values such as justice, beauty, and truth. For Smith, ideals such as justice, beauty, and truth have transcendent properties which are never fully comprehended or completely actualized, yet they lure us by their force of intrinsic attractiveness and through them we are opened for growth in the direction of infinity (Hughes, 1986, 14). Smith makes a helpful distinction in this regard between 'apprehension' and 'comprehension' (Hughes, 1986, 32) of the divine in the midst of the world. Even the most evolved saint or avatar can never comprehend the divine or contain the divine conceptually, but apprehension of the divine is certainly within their realm of capability. Since, moreover, persons of faith always fall short of their ideals, this means that faith is always more than a mere observer can observe in terms of external behaviour or explicit expression. It is really not possible to measure faith quantitatively on the basis of behaviour or expression. It is in the nature of ideals to resist formulation by presenting reality as open-ended and

thus in process of becoming something more than it presently is.

It is for this reason that Smith insists on the need to think of faith as an adjective and as a verb, not as a noun. What tends to happen when faith is thought of in substantive terms is that intellectual barriers are set up that lead to exclusivism (Hughes, 1986, 23). For example, if I say I am a Christian (noun) this implies that I am not a Muslim (noun), but if I say I am Christian (adjective), meaning I am committed to being Christ-like and bringing Christ's love to others, I need not think of non-Christians as spiritually inferior. The same applies to Islam. If I say I am Muslim (adjective) this refers to an internal attitude of submission to God's injunctions, while the statement I am a Muslim (noun) refers to my formal membership in a community. Faith as an ongoing response to transcendence goes hand in glove with a dynamic view of faith as an adjective. One who is faithful is one who is actively engaged with transcendence. The English language, unfortunately, does not have a verb such as 'faith-ing' to describe this activity, but the Greek of the New Testament does: the verb *pisteuo* conveys the sense of Christian existence as an active state of commitment to imitating Christ's love for humankind (Hughes, 1986, 25). In the English language we speak of 'having faith,' but this falls well short of effectively conveying the sense of faith as a verb.

In order to emphasize that we humans never actually attain to the ideals of justice, beauty, and truth, and that we experience the term of transcendence as elusive and beyond comprehension, Smith always uses the preposition 'through,' not 'in,' when speaking of the term of transcendence: faith is 'through' God or 'through' Christ, never faith 'in' God or 'in' Christ. The preposition 'through' serves to underscore a sense of direction or intentionality towards ultimate reality which never presumes to contain or comprehend the divine. This line of thought is designed to avoid any claims of superiority by one religion over other

religions, which would give rise to exclusivity and intolerance rather than inclusivity and respect for other traditions. Smith's argument here may seem strange and unnecessarily pedantic, yet it does have some value when properly understood and it does receive support, I think, from the traditional doctrine of the Trinity according to which all things are 'from' God the Father, redeemed 'through' Christ the Son, and perfected 'in' the Holy Spirit. It is through the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world that we come to know the Father, and through the revelation of the Father in the persons of the Son and the Spirit we become faithful people committed to actualizing the ideals of the kingdom of God in the midst of our world, for the sake of the world's salvation. The proposition of Smith is not as unreasonable as it may seem to us at first sight, and it does assist us in conceiving of how persons who profess to have no faith 'in' God can nonetheless have a particular type of faith that comes into being 'through' God who is the source and term of all transcendent values such as justice, truth, and beauty.

It is also of importance to draw attention to the fact that faith as openness to transcendence leads to a recognition of a plurality of ways of being open, although Smith is at pains not to speak of many faiths but rather many forms of faith (Hughes, 1986, 31 & 43). Faith is always spoken of in the singular so that it may serve as a unifying thread in his task of formulating a programme that will facilitate the creation of a global community of peace, good will, perseverance, and mutual respect amongst all. Care must be taken not to interpret the singular usage of faith as meaning that faith is everywhere the same (Hughes, 1986, 47). All humans are open to transcendence, yet given the boundaries of the historical realm interpretation is always necessary to arrive at some understanding of the divine. There is no such thing as an unmediated experience of the divine that is able to capture or contain it. All our inherited conceptualities of the divine are limited, and when we accept and appreciate

this basic point we will be able to effectively avoid the pitfalls of exclusivity, fundamentalism, and intolerance among the religions of the world.

(3) Third, faith is spoken of as a quality of human beings. Faith as openness to transcendence and as a capacity for meaning are illustrations of this quality. But for Smith faith is not merely a human quality but *the* essential human quality, since human uniqueness is indicated by our capacity to embrace a vision that transcends the mundane world (Hughes, 1986, 25). As the essential human quality, faith is necessary for psychological integration and vitality; it is not merely one element alongside other elements that make up our lives, but the value that all aspects of human life take on (Hughes, 1986, 17). Understood in this fashion, faith as a human quality assumes a 'salvific' character insofar as it refers to a human ability for transformation. By 'saved' Smith means, '... saved from nihilism, alienation, anomie, despair, from the bleak despondency of meaninglessness. Saved from unfreedom; from being the victim of one's own whims within, or of pressures without; saved from being merely an organism reacting to its environment' (Hughes, 26). It is apparent that as the essential quality of human beings, faith takes on a transformative character that derives from its response to transcendence.

Talk of faith as the essential human quality might suggest an overly anthropocentric view of faith where its gratuity as a gift of God is denied or overlooked. But this is not Smith's intention. He explicitly affirms the notion of faith as sheer gift of God (Smith, 1981, 169; Hughes, 1986, 34). His formulation of the issue is solidly theocentric, for faith is a universal quality of humankind precisely because God is present everywhere and at all times active in offering the gift of faith. Perhaps the thought of Thomas Aquinas can be of help here. Aquinas taught that nothing is more deeply interior to an entity than its existence, hence God is present to created things at this most interior level, enabling them to exist and

to act according to the order of secondary causes. Furthermore, Aquinas asserted that real relations obtain between God, the human mind, and the world of finite things, thereby highlighting the interconnectedness of reality. In this Thomistic perspective, we can understand why Smith's portrayal of faith as the essential human quality is not excessively anthropocentric but genuinely theocentric.

(4) Fourth, faith as an organizing pattern of meaning refers to a total way of seeing the world. When we respond to transcendence and actualize meaning so that faith becomes a realized quality in our lives, we experience the need to organize life around the values that arise from that response. The cumulative tradition of a particular form of religious faith, which refers to 'the entire mass of overt objective data that constitutes the historical deposit' (Hughes, 1986, 10), is an elaborate and total system of perceiving reality, which includes liturgical practices, doctrinal systems, moral codes, legal and social institutions, conventions, myths, and so on. While the cumulative tradition is passed on from generation to generation, Smith is keen to repudiate any notion of an essence or unchanging core of a tradition (Hughes, 1986, 11).

This is not to say that there are no central themes or ideas that have persisted throughout the history of a tradition, but these central themes are seen by Smith as always open to future redefinition given that we are historical beings. With the rise of historical consciousness has come the recognition that new conditions require new expressions of faith. The Christ of the Greek Christianity of the early centuries, the Christ-Son of Luther's severe Father-God, and the Christ of nineteenth liberalism, for example, all have the figure of Christ at the centre of their systems, yet the meaning of Christ for the faithful is different in each of these historical contexts. On the Christian view, Christ is the unsurpassable, absolute revelation of God, yet we must not think that the Christian possesses full knowledge of God or how God is working in the

world to direct all things to a final end. The Christian holds that salvation comes through Christ who is the Saviour of the world, but what salvation means has never been defined definitively in the history of Christianity. No one concept, image, or metaphor of salvation can ever fully fathom the mystery of salvation in Christ. Salvation as freedom from eternal damnation (Luther, Calvin), as the conquering of mortality and corruptibility (Irenaeus), as deification (Athanasius), and as satisfying the honour of God (Anselm), have all featured prominently in the Christian tradition, yet no one model is considered definitive. Smith's point, then, is largely confirmed by the history of Christian thought.

### *Positive Secularism and Negative Secularism*

The aforementioned aspects of the phenomenon of faith are not restricted to the sphere of religion but can be extended to include the realm of the secular world, thereby making faith a truly universal phenomenon. Smith is keen to emphasize that faith is not rare and confined to religious persons; rather, persons have always lived by faith, for most have held to values that inspired them and made claims upon them. Hence Smith writes in provocative fashion: '...the only true atheist is he who loves no one and whom no one loves; who does not care for truth, sees no beauty, strives for no justice; who knows no courage or no joy, finds no meaning, and has lost all hope' (Hughes, 1986, 15). The true atheist, in other words, is one who denies the ideal values of justice, beauty, and truth, who is not concerned with the fundamental questions of the why, whence, and whither of existence in the world, and is devoid of vitality because gravely lacking in psychological integration. Smith therefore speaks of a 'negative secularism' which espouses no kind of faith, and he equates this type of secularism with modern nihilism which he sees as the primary disorder today in the West (Hughes, 1986, 27).

Nihilism and disintegration are highlighted as the opposites to faith, while fanaticism is presented as the perversion of faith. Every religion has produced fanatics as well as saints or avatars. Secular forms of faith, it should be added, are not immune from fanaticism either, as evidenced by militant forms of atheism that seek to discredit religion altogether (by coming up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith) in the presumed interests of apprehending truth and securing human progress (cf. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens), and by violent social revolutions informed by a Marxist philosophy of a classless and uniform society where all are equal (cf. Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung). In themselves the use of reason and equality for all are good, but when they are pursued in exclusion of other values they become distorted and lead to a type of fanaticism that represents a perversion of faith as openness to transcendence.

In contrast to negative secularism, Smith upholds the notion of 'positive secularism' which he sees as rooted in the Greek humanist tradition. This is regarded as a form of faith inasmuch as it consists in the surrender to the ideal of reason (Hughes, 1986, 48). The search for rational structure and truth in things constitutes an ongoing stance towards the world, which is normally associated with the modern concern for freedom (from religious authorities), trust in human dignity, and belief in human progress and perfectibility. It is apparent that Smith is quite happy to concede that there have been positive achievements of modernity, and in many respects his views on modernity reflect the positive attitude taken by the Second Vatican Council on the issue of culture. The Council expressed the hope that the 'more universal form of culture' that has emerged from the advances in the sciences, technology, and media, will promote the 'unity' of humankind, and it spoke quite confidently about the 'birth of a new humanism' (*Gaudium et spes*, 53–56). At the same time, the Council tempered its optimism about the emergence of new mass-cultures by acknowledging difficulties in

the present situation: How do we prevent new cultural forms from overthrowing traditional wisdom? How do we prevent the autonomy of culture from becoming narrowly secularist and hostile to religion?

It could be argued that the postmodern age, which offers a critique of the ideals of modernity, is more open to religious horizons than modernity (Gallagher, 1997, ch. 8). Smith, however, is not prepared to jettison the ideal of progress, and what is distinct about his position is that he maintains that the religions of the world have an indispensable and necessary part to play in the creation of a global community. The value of a religious outlook on life, as stated earlier, is that it offers the possibility of overcoming tribal interest, individual self-centredness, and it has the capacity to survive disappointment in working towards a world-wide community. The unity of humankind cannot be achieved without inter-religious understanding and ongoing ecumenical commitment. What is more, since the facts of history show that human progress in forming a global community is fraught with seemingly insurmountable difficulties and obstacles, the religions of the world should serve as invaluable wit-

nesses to the nature of humankind as essentially open to transcendence and capable of moving beyond the present situation so as to realize the ideals of justice, truth, and beauty. Integral to religious faith is the experience of being 'saved' from alienation, despair, anomie, and meaninglessness, which is to say that a religious outlook on life engenders hope, even a hope against hope, which a narrowly secularist form of faith struggles to provide.

The thought of Smith on the universal phenomenon of faith, to conclude, represents a rich source of material for reflection on (a) faith as *the* essential human quality without which life loses its vitality and nihilism rears its head, (b) the primary role that the religions of the world have to play in the creation of a global community, (c) and how to develop more positive attitudes towards secularists, atheists, and humanists who are committed to the ideals of truth, justice, and beauty. There are, no doubt, problematic and provocative elements in Smith's writings, yet there is certainly much of value that can lead to more constructive dialogue and interaction between the religions as well as between the religious world and the secular world.

## REFERENCES

- Dulles, A. *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983).
- Fowler, J. 'Introduction,' J. Fowler & R.W. Lovin (eds.) *Trajectories in Faith* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1980).
- Gallagher, M. P. *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997).
- Hughes, E. J. *Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Theology for the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986).
- Lane, D. A. *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).
- Pannikar, R. 'Faith as a Constitutive Human Dimension,' *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).
- Rahner, K. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1978).
- Smith, W. C. *Towards a World Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1981).
- Tracy, D. *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).