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Wilfred Cantwell Smith's Concept of Religion: An Islamic Appraisal

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Abstract

In the vein of many Western scholars of comparative religions, Wilfred Smith also realizes the difficulty implicated in defining religion but he is unique in daring to call for discarding religion, arguing that the concept is inadequate. According to him, the inadequacy of the concept leads to the intellectual dilemma of the relation between many religious traditions and the One Ultimate Reality, the historical change and abiding truth, the world and God. The solution to such a dilemma is to revise the categories of intellectual discourse in the field of theology/religious studies and move towards a better alternative. These alternatives should aim to depict human religious life in a more adequate and universal way. Hence, Smith suggests splitting the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of religion and proposes for them the categories of faith and cumulative tradition respectively. Primarily, this research seeks to explore the significance of Smith's critique of religion as well as the practicality and utility of the alternative categories i.e., faith and cumulative tradition in the modern global scenario from an Islamic perspective.

Keywords: smith's concept of religion, unity and diversity, faith and cumulative tradition, religious pluralism, world theology

Introduction

Wilfred Cantwell Smith is known for an essentially radical approach to conceptualizations associated with the term "religion." It is important to note that not only his academic background and history of his discipline but also the ideas on religion prevalent in his age are very significant in his conceptualization of religion. So, before embarking on the study of Smith's concepts of religion, faith, and cumulative tradition, it is necessary to have a bird's eye view of how the term "religion" was used since the dawn of the discipline of comparative Religions until it reached the scholars engaged with the enterprise of interreligious understanding current in Smith's time.

In the 18th century, when some thinkers considered the plurality of religions for the first time seriously, "religion" was usually conceived to be revelation based. But later on "from being a body of revealed truth, it became a developing organism."¹ Thanks to Darwinian influence on all the intellectual disciplines, the scholars began to look for the

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¹Erick J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 48.

origin of religion (both in its singular and plural forms). They produced massive literature on its elementary forms. Consequently, in the 19th century, most of the attempts to define religion revolved around identifying the essential qualities of religion and the common substratum of the various forms of religion. All the pioneers of comparative Religions as well as the subsequent thinkers till the beginning of the 20th century were deeply engaged in producing the corpus about the above mentioned issues.

The scholars like Max Müller (1823-1900), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Tylor (1832-1917), James Frazer (1854-1941), Emile Durkheim (1853-1917) and many others had expressed deep interest in the origin and essence of religion. But there were exceptions like Max Weber, who “from the beginning refrains from giving a definition of religion, saying that he is not concerned with its essence.”² A careful study of Weber's theories shows that his orientation as well as goal to avoid the definition of “religion” is radically different from that of Wilfred Smith.

The scholarly study of religion in the advent of 20th century represents the shift of emphasis from the historical and rational dimension to the recognition of spiritual and transcendental aspects of religion. Rudolf Otto's (1869-1937) idea of “holy” and Joachim Wach (1898-1955)'s concept of religion as ‘the total response of the man's total being to what he experiences as ultimate reality is the evident examples of this changing trend. But here again, the “sacred” has been taken as an essential element of religion whereas Smith reserves a distinct position in this context which we shall try to elaborate on.

Twentieth century scholars, who were more seriously confronted with the issue of inter-religious relationships, realized the problems inherent in the definition of religion based upon its essential characteristics. Consequently, they developed definitions based upon their ideas regarding the dimensions of religion avoiding the essentialist approach; thus broadening the category of religion by fulfilling any of these dimensions. Primarily Wittgenstein's idea of “family resemblance” influenced the philosophers of religion. The definitions coined by Fredrick Stereng, Eric J. Sharpe, Charles Glock, Ninian Smart and Frank Whaling are the instances of such efforts. But Peter Connolly very rightly summarizes the problem with all attempts to define religion. “If the boundaries are drawn too tightly much of what many people would think should be included will not be.”³ And here he brings the examples of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism which do not fall in the category of religion according to the definition of ‘religion’ provided by the Cambridge International Dictionary of English. Then Connolly gives an open definition by Ronald Cavanaugh that religion is “the varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them.”⁴ And then comments that “This is so broad that it would allow association of football or any

²Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1973), 49.

³Peter Connolly, *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Continuum 1995), 5.

⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

other “unrestricted value activity to be classified as religions.”⁵ So, “if the boundaries around the term religion are drawn too loosely it is difficult to know exactly what is being referred to when it is employed.”⁶

John Hick, like Connolly, understands the difficulties involved in the attempt to define religion but both of them still devised working definitions. Similarly, Mircea Eliade concluded that although all such theories are relative, yet they possess practical value. Hans Kung realizes the dilemma of defining religion when he says: “Religion is as hard to define as art. I knew what it was until you asked me to explain it. We might answer, as Augustine did (to the question “what is time?”).”⁷ Ninian Smart also recognizes the terminological problem in the Western definition of religion but simultaneously defends the conceptualization associated with ‘religion.’⁸ Despite all the realization by most of the scholars, the term ‘religion’ itself has not faced a seriously radical challenge before Smith. The credit goes to Wilfred Cantwell Smith who extensively argued the inadequacy of the term ‘religion’ in his classic *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

2. The Inadequacy of “Religion”

Wilfred Smith intelligently recognizes the significance of a new vision of interreligious understanding in today’s panorama. But simultaneously, he lays the foundations of this enterprise on a verbal inquiry, which leads him to denounce the usual trend of taking one’s terminologies to be universal. According to Smith, the global vision of mutual understanding requires an unequivocal and clear expression so that words may not appear quizzical. To be critical of one’s concepts before employing them in such an encompassing endeavor is necessary because often similar words could convey strikingly different meanings to people of different civilizations. Following this principle, Smith analyses the term religion and its connotations in great detail and invites his colleagues as well to “...decide whether or not in the future to use the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘the religions’ as fundamental elements of understanding.”⁹

It has already been noted that none of the available definitions of religion encapsulates all the world traditions precisely. Thus taking such an inadequate concept to be the fundamental category in the global efforts of reconciliation is certainly contrary to the true affirmation of the present pluralist context. So, the need for a new conceptualization is acute, which could consider ‘the interreligious and even intra-religious strife and disdain’ along with the common characteristics of the religious traditions. So, Smith’s thesis in this

⁵Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), 31.

⁶Peter Connolly, *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, 7.

⁷Hans Kung, Joseph Van Ess, Heinrich Van Stietencron, Heinz Bechert, *Christianity and World Religions Paths to Dialogue* (New York: Orbis Books Maryknoll, 1993), xvi.

⁸Ninian Smart, *Reflections in the Mirror of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 197-200.

⁹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 120.

perspective is that the concept of religion itself is inadequate and needs to be replaced by some other categories which may serve as the foundation of interreligious encounters in a more promising way. He says: "It is perhaps not presumptuous to hold that no definition of religion so far proposed has proven compelling, no generalization has come anywhere near to adequacy."¹⁰

Admitting the fact that 'religion' has become a part and parcel of thinking patterns of both academia and readers, he calls for a willingness "to revise, but not to abandon, one's pursuit of understanding."¹¹ Noting the failure of genius attempts to identify the essence of religion, Smith proceeds to take a new orientation. The new pathway requires the revision of our pre-suppositions and the courageous discarding of inapt terms or questions and that is the only way in which "an understanding of the variegated and evolving religious situation of mankind can proceed, and indeed perhaps can proceed only."¹² Although this process seems to be absurd because "religion" serves as the fundamental category in the discipline of Comparative Religions particularly yet it is inevitable to have an adequate understanding of religious diversity for converting "our nascent world society into a world community."¹³

Consequently, the proposed task is to reformulate our capacities and envision their intellectual limitations regarding the non-rational phenomenon of religiosity, avoiding the abstraction of dynamic and ever changing element of faith in the form of stagnant verbalization. Smith is fully convinced that "those who would understand and those who would intelligently participate, are confronted with a task of no mean proportions."¹⁴ At the same time, Smith is very optimistic about the consequences of this Copernican revolution in the field of interreligious understanding and suggests it to "a return to the long-range lines of classical advance."¹⁵

3. Smith's Arguments for Discarding the Term Religion

Smith's call for a radical revision and reformulation of the conceptual categories is supported by forceful arguments. It is also noteworthy that the discarding of the old conceptualizations, according to Smith, does not indicate their meaninglessness or non-existence in the lives of people; rather, it is inevitable to abandon their use because "they are imprecise and liable to distort what they are asked to represent."¹⁶ Being a passionate protagonist of interreligious understanding, he is perplexed to see that "the phrase 'religions of the world' is first used in a treatise in which these are presented as such in

¹⁰Ibid., 11.

¹¹Ibid., 14.

¹²Ibid., 12.

¹³Ibid., 8.

¹⁴Ibid., 4.

¹⁵Ibid., 16.

¹⁶Ibid., 125.

order to be refuted.”¹⁷ The arguments Smith puts forward to strengthen his contention are as follows:

a. “God” and “history” are two basic notions which must be explained adequately by anyone who seeks to interpret the religious life of man, as Smith considers them to be inevitable categories of believers’ lives.¹⁸ The notion of religion distorts the idea of God and makes it personal by employing the distinction between one’s religion and other’s religions and thus creates serious problems in mutual understanding. Smith observes that “the concept ‘other religions’ ... inherently turns their gods into idols, into false deities.”¹⁹

Though the argument seems to be powerful but one can doubt whether religion is responsible for this misunderstanding. Because the pluralist approaches of other writers like John Hick, Hans Küng and Frank Whaling embrace all the religious traditions retaining the notion of religion. The word ‘others’ seems more liable to create the distance and enmity. So, the problem can better be solved by replacing “we talking about others’ religions” with “we all” talking with each other about us.”²⁰ Such an atmosphere of mutual understanding would certainly prevent turning ‘other’s gods into idols’ because here the Ultimate Reality becomes the transcendent truth and all religions become variegated responses to it.

The other counterpart of transcendence, whose diversity and flux are beyond the grasp of the ‘religion,’ is the historical phenomenon of religious life. The rich, ever-changing and always evolving religious history is too vast and multidimensional as well as variegated to be grasped by a limited conceptualization of religion. The mundane character of religious history prevents it from being defined as Smith believes “the definable is the pure, and purity is to be found only in theory and in God. Whatever exists mundanely cannot be defined. Whatever can be defined does not exist.”²¹ Smith’s approach can be compared to G. E. Moore’s critique of definitions of ‘good.’ According to him, all the attempts to define ‘good’ are nothing other than naturalistic fallacy. And this is why it should be abandoned to define ‘good.’²²

Smith further writes that “apart from the proper names of persons, the only nouns that can stand up to final scrutiny are 'God'... and 'man'.... All else is either a conceptual abstraction and/or adjectival.”²³ So, the notion of religion, primarily concerned with definition and essence, is incapable to deal properly with the religious history of mankind.

¹⁷Ibid., 43.

¹⁸Ibid., 134.

¹⁹Ibid., 140.

²⁰Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Comparative Religion Whither and Why?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 34.

²¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 146.

²²G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 20th edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 10.

²³Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 327, n.3.

Consequently, both the inner dimension or transcendental dimension and manifestation in the form of religious history are mistreated by "religion." Since it cannot encompass them properly, it needs to be discarded. But it must be clear that surely whatever exists is not an exact embodiment of its theoretical definition but an approximation only. So, it seems vague to eliminate religion on the basis of such an argument as it would justify abolishing many other similar concepts which are essential to human thought and activity.

This point of Smith's theory is subjected to severe criticism by E. H. Pyle. Pyle bluntly states; "Smith seems unaware that there are different types of definition, functional, evaluative, or substantive, and that further the logical distinction between nominal and real definitions must be employed. M. E. Spiro has stressed that three difficulties arise in the use of real definitions in the social sciences. A hypothetical construct may be reified and assigned a real definition. (This seems to express Smith's main worry). A real definition may stipulate what is the 'essential nature' of something, a notion which is vague and usually non-empirical. Finally, an obsession with universality tends to make definitions vague and abstract. It is clear that the danger of misleading reification is not avoided merely by dropping a word."²⁴

b. Smith elaborates the connotations which are ascribed to the term religion and tries to show the inconsistency of the term with the concepts it is meant to convey. The four meanings Smith attributes to religion are personal piety, an organized system of beliefs, practices and observances taken ideally and practiced historically, and "religion as a generic summation."²⁵ Finally, he suggests "that the term 'religion' is confusing and unnecessary especially in the first and fourth senses, distorting in the second and the third."²⁶

c. The concept 'religion' neither serves the purpose of the academic study of the religious movements by observers nor are believers themselves satisfied to use it for the description of their patterns of faith. Smith assures his readers that not only he but also many other careful scholars of Comparative Religions as well as theologians emphasize the need to eradicate the concept from academic language. In this context, he cites Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer among the Western philosophers of religion.²⁷ On the other hand, Karl Barth, Milton Steinberg, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahathera Uthittala and Muhammad Al-Bahi are quoted in order to establish that the Christians, the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Muslims, as participants respectively, are against employing the term 'religion' in their cases.²⁸

But here it can be remarked that Karl Barth belongs to the Christian School of Theology which considers Christianity to be a unique faith and all the other traditions to

²⁴E. H. Pyle, "In Defense of Religion," *Religious Studies* 3, no.1 (1967): 348.

²⁵Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 49.

²⁶Ibid., 50.

²⁷Ibid., 125.

²⁸Ibid., 126.

be false 'religions'; so the word religion inherently carries falsity in Barth's intellectual perception. Thus, he cannot serve as a representative of the whole of Christianity. Similarly, Milton Steinberg propagates the notion of Reconstructionist Judaism claiming that Judaism is much more than merely a religion. So it is inevitable to explore the concept of religion in the intellectual make up of those who consider religion to be a sinful notion and call for a religion-less Christianity and to probe whether their grounds bear a resemblance to those of Smith or not.

Daniel Jenkins criticizes the approach of the Protestant theologians like Kraemer and Bonhoeffer who consider religion to be a sinful notion by saying that "it is man's 'effort to make some kind of adjustment to the "ground of being" on a level less radical than that of the self-forgetful commitment of faith'."²⁹ Bleeker considers Karl Barth to be among the greatest dogmatists of this age but he also criticizes Barth saying that in this context "either Barth's statements are untrue, or his use of words is artificial, arbitrary and apt to give rise to misunderstanding."³⁰

Moreover, as far as Islam and Eastern religions are concerned their conceptualizations of 'Din' and 'Dharma' are profound and comprehensive enough to call to shun the usage of 'religion' in their cases. So, the contexts and motives to avoid the term by these scholars must be considered in their correct contexts which are radically different from those of Smith. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that "despite of the complications for understanding what the word introduces, there is little doubt that the word is here to stay."³¹

Later on, Smith postulates that the term religion hinders the observer from viewing the transcendent element behind the outward practices and formalities and thus prevents him from understanding reality. "God does not reveal religion; He reveals Himself."³² It is the human response to transcendence which gives birth to forms of worship and observance and when termed as religion, becomes "a substitute" to the faith instead of being "a channel."³³ His observation seems to carry weight because the observers usually confine themselves to the external of religion and do not bother to see what the believer is seeing. But here again, the problem lies in the methodology of the observer itself rather than the term. Here, the remarkable similarity between the ideas of Smith and Hick is observable. Hick's famous book entitled *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, shows Smith's deep influence on the development of his thoughts.

Smith's assertion of God revealing himself is exclusively based on the Christian idea of revelation. Other traditions might believe that God reveals His will which can be denoted

²⁹Daniel Jenkins, *Religion and Coming of Age in the Honest to God Debate* (London: S. C. M., 1963), 210.

³⁰E. H. Pyle, "In Defense of Religion," 351.

³¹James B. Wiggins, *In Praise of Religious Diversity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 99.

³²Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 128.

³³*Ibid.*, 129.

as 'religion'. So, according to other traditions, 'religion' can be the revealed divine commandments unlike Smith who thinks religion is the human response to the divine revelation. As Dr. Deen Muhammad clearly states while criticizing Smith's approach, "Religion is a set of revealed principles to guide human beings in faith and practice. By accepting faith, man becomes religious theoretically and by acting upon it he becomes religious practically or fully religious. It follows that religiosity cannot be equated to religion. Religion is there as divinely revealed truth irrespective of religious persons."³⁴

d. The Western reifications trend misconceived a phenomenon as rich, ever changing and boundless as religion. It is "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness"³⁵ to postulate about religion taking it as an entity. What observers call religion is a continued response which changes and fluctuates because of its being "inherently human."³⁶ It is purely 'a western convention' to talk about different religious movements of the world imagining them as different entities. Religions are not revealed as the codified systems rather "God reveals himself" through religions. Religions take shape through the ages influenced by the faith of the followers; so they "do not exist up in the sky somewhere elaborated, finished and static; they exist in men's hearts."³⁷

This notion seems to be based upon the idea that since everything in the world is changing; so our concepts cannot describe the phenomena except by distorting it because it is too complex and too fluid, whereas our concepts are static. The very idea of entity or thing is problematic in Smith's discourse because it presupposes exact embodiment whereas the thing can be a referent in the world simply. It is not necessary for a thing to be tangible and observable.

Islam stands as an obvious exception to this thesis and Smith himself is well-aware of this fact.³⁸ This is why he attempts to represent Islam as submission and obedience to the Ultimate Reality and states that the understanding of Islam as a reified entity is a quite recent development. He concludes "that the Islamic has been in some ways from the first the most reified of all man's living religious movement, that it has at its birth and throughout been subject to massive reifying pressures."³⁹

Talal Asad, in his enlightening critique of Smith's idea of reification, provides us with a detailed analysis of the examples of religions as reified entities employed by Smith and demonstrates that according to Smith polytheistic religions are less reified as compared to the monotheistic religions with Islam at the summit. On the basis of this argument, he suggests that "[t]he notion of religious reification is closely connected with a thesis that is

³⁴M. M. Deen Muhammad, "Faith and Religion: Reflections on Some Ideas of Wilfred Cantwell Smith," *Hawleyyatul Jamia al Islamiyyah al Alamiyyah* (2000): 9.

³⁵Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 93.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 53.

³⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Comparative Religion Whither and Why?* 34.

³⁸Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 84.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

now quite widely repeated but only half-formulated in Smith's text: namely, that monotheistic religions are quintessentially intolerant. It is the sharply bounded, integrated, and totalistic character of monotheistic belief systems (so the thought seems to run) that makes them hostile to difference and jealous of loyalties."⁴⁰ He also considers Smith's idea of reification to be the influence of Weber's notion of 'routinization of charisma.'

Although Smith does not explicitly use the expressions of monotheistic and polytheistic traditions, yet it can be inferred easily from the evidence he brings in his analysis of the traditions that Talal Asad is right in his observation. For instance, he says while talking about the Christians and the Muslims that "We deplore our divisions and have tended to feel that ideally at least there is one Christian, one Islamic truth; whereas Hindus delight in multi-formity, and tend to hold that personal religious truth has not become sharp if it does not prick the bubble of generalization."⁴¹ At another place, he says that in a more explicit way, "For Indians, the reality is not two, but ultimately one, and meanwhile pluralist. Even religious assertions are not thought of as either true or false, but as more or less approximate: the world is not black and white, but a panorama, not of grey but reds and greens and yellows."⁴²

Be it as it may, Islam emerged as an identifiable system and named itself since the beginning unlike others to whom the names were given. So, the example of Islam deserves a distinct position in this context. Although faith and commitment to the divine revelation are primarily significant, yet Islam inherently "is the manner of the institution of belief and faith, the manner of expression of the law, the manner of religious attitude and ethical and moral conduct -the manner in which submission to God is enacted."⁴³ Because "real submission is a continuous act lived throughout the entire span of one's ethical life" nor it is the kind that operates only within the realm of the heart without manifesting itself outwardly in the action of the body as works performed in obedience to God's law."⁴⁴

Victoria S. Harrison in her article *The pragmatics of defining religion in a multi-cultural world* takes Smith's opinion into account and after analyzing his basis for the critique of religion, she evaluates the theory in the following words: "It may be that Smith's theory provides a more accurate characterization of the indigenous belief systems of India and Africa, many of which to this day are remaining localized and lacking a trans-

⁴⁰Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*," *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (Feb., 2001): 205-222.

⁴¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 74.

⁴²Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, 82-83.

⁴³Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Lahore: Sohail Academy, 2001), 54.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 52.

geographical organizing body, than it does of the religions of Europe - particularly as they developed in the Common Era."⁴⁵

Furthermore, she refers to various brutalities committed in the name of religion before the advent of the modern era to which Smith attributes reification of religions as contraposed entities. For instance, she mentions the failure of Smith's theory to give a reason for the wars in the name of religion, which wreaked havoc on the Western Europe in the transition from the medieval to the modern period and the continual maltreatment of the Jews by the European nations long before the modern era. She strongly opposes the view that modern intelligentsia is responsible for the rivalry between religious traditions rather "there is evidence that a major force in the extremely lengthy development of certain religious traditions has been their awareness of rival traditions."⁴⁶

e. Once it is established that religion is neither a revealed system nor a stagnant entity, Smith further moves to denounce the theory of origin of religion. He discards the "big-bang theory of origins" and on this revolutionary thesis, he lays the foundation of his historiography. The traditional orientation of historians towards the study of original themes (the central themes of a religious tradition at the time of its origin) by considering them the standard of truth is criticized severely in Smith's *Towards a World Theology*.⁴⁷ He says bluntly, "The early forms of the movement are no more significant, and no truer than it's later; and to treat them as if they were is to distort."⁴⁸ The religions bearing distinct names are no evidence of their having originated at particular moments because they are not named so by an intervening supernatural force rather "modernity has conferred names where they did not exist."⁴⁹ As for Smith, modern intellectual transition is responsible for shifting the focus from "personal orientation to depersonalized intellectual systemization."⁵⁰ Then Smith proceeds to mention the exact dates of usage of the names for the various religious traditions.⁵¹ According to him, the Greek impacts caused Judaism to adopt a name for itself for the first time in history in order to preserve its distinct identity.

Smith's denial of the origin of the religious movements initiated by intervening of a supernatural power at a particular moment in the history of mankind is misleading because the historical documents of almost all the traditions preserve the account of their dawn at specific times. Although their historical evidence, if examined 'scientifically,' fall short of absolute authenticity, yet the human testimonies for their occurrence are so abundant that it would be unjust to deny the emergence of the new religions at particular moments of

⁴⁵Victoria S. Harrison, "The Pragmatics of Defining Religion in a Multi-cultural World," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59, no. 3 (June 2006): 140.

⁴⁶Ibid., 141.

⁴⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 154-167.

⁴⁸Ibid., 160.

⁴⁹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 60.

⁵⁰Ibid., 40.

⁵¹Ibid., 61.

history. Hans Kung criticizes Smith's stance very beautifully through the example of Islam. He suggests that the religious history of mankind is not a natural continuous flow rather it is 'a continuum in discontinuity.' According to Joseph Van Ess, the leaps, changes, breaks, extinction and advent of new life are responsible to shape the course of history. No religious movement can be simply an extension of the pre-existing social situation. He illustrates the issue further stating, "Muhammad is discontinuity in person, an ultimately irreducible figure, who cannot be simply derived from what preceded him, but stands radically apart from it as he, with the Qur'ān, establishes permanent new standards. In that respect, Muhammad (SAW) and the Qur'ān represent a decisive break, a departure from the past, a shift towards a new future. It was fitting to make the *Heigra* the start of a new era: without Muhammad (SAW) as a source, there would be no stream; without this spring, there would be no tree."⁵²

Moreover, Smith's claim that earlier forms of the movement are not truer than the later ones is also contrary to the traditional religious understanding. Particularly in the case of Islam, the early age is idealized and The Holy Prophet (SAW) himself said, "The people of my generation are the best, then those who follow them, and then those who follow the latter."⁵³

In fact, Smith lays the foundation of this thesis on his Christian idea of revelation. He bluntly says, "The concept of revelation had been standard in Christian thinking from New Testament times. Yet no one before the eighteenth century had ever supposed that what was revealed was a religion."⁵⁴ It is a specifically Christian stance that the revelation is in the form of a person not religion. And it is unscholarly to generalize it for all. James B. Wiggins recognizes the "anachronistic imposition of the word upon the people and their worldview"⁵⁵ and a Western attempt of conferring the "names in an Adamesque fashion to differentiate the traditions such as Hinduism or Jainism" but simultaneously posits that "they have by now gained such currency as to be inexpugnable."⁵⁶

f. Another argument which Smith employs while proposing to discard the 'religion' is that no translations of the term are found in other languages. First of all, he analyzes the religious lives of primitive civilizations like Greek and Egypt to conclude that no linguistic generalization in the objectified sense of religion is found. Oxford Classical Dictionary supports his conclusion by declaring the absence of any word corresponding to 'religion' in Western understanding.⁵⁷ So no civilization except the modern Western schools of thought had reified the human responses to the transcendent reality as a separate entity.

⁵²Hans Kung, *Christianity and World Religions Paths to Dialogue*, 25.

⁵³Muhammad b Ismail Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Witnesses, Book 48, Vol. 3, Hadith 820, <https://muflihun.com/bukhari/48/820>

⁵⁴Ibid., 41.

⁵⁵James Wiggins, *In Praise of Religious Diversity*, 99.

⁵⁶Ibid., 99.

⁵⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 54-59.

Even in the Western Intellectual History, the usage of religion as a reified entity is quite recent and haphazard. In the ancient and Medieval Christian writings, the Latin term *religio* refers to either observances or piety. And in 1474, when Marcilio Ficino incorporated “religion” in the title of his book, he meant by it a universal human quality of responding to God.⁵⁸ Until the 17th century, when people became accustomed to abstraction and generalization in intellectual activities, the term meant no more than a relationship between humans and the Ultimate. Smith characterizes this change “from the dynamic of the heart to impersonal system; from singular to plural; and from a Platonic to a propositional conception of truth.”⁵⁹

According to Smith, Hegel and his disciple Ludwig Feuerbach were responsible for popularizing ‘religion’ as a ‘definite and fixed’ entity and the generations that came after them embraced their philosophy and engaged whole heartedly in defining the term and reifying all the known patterns of faith and practices by giving them names. So, “the final and inherent validity”⁶⁰ as well as “Cosmic legitimacy”⁶¹ attributed to the term ‘religion, need to be ruled out by considering it a mundane and quite chaotic development. One can infer from the very argument presented by Smith that the inadequacy or distortion of the concept owes itself to the presumption of taking specific connotations as final and ultimate. It is intelligent to perceive that definitions in humanities are not “statements of ultimate truth about the object of study, a sacred moment in which the whole of the knowledge of the subject has coalesced and is encapsulated.”⁶² What needs to be revised is the idea of the definition itself and not the concept because the intellectual errors occur when working definitions are imagined as final versions. As far as the definitions are human endeavors, they are destined to be fallible, subject to criticism and limited to particular circumstances. In this case, it is not the crisis of one concept, rather of the whole Western epistemology that has lost connections to the authentic sources of knowledge.

Here it must also be stated that to find the exact parallel, of a certain concept developed within one intellectual tradition, in other traditions or civilizations is really hard because the context and background of the tradition play a pivotal role in determining the plethora of meanings associated with the concept. Consequently, the term ‘religion’ must be different from others’ concepts like Dharma, Din and way. So, undoubtedly the conceptualization differs but all of the traditions do possess a term as substitutes of ‘religion’. It would be better to rehearse the meanings of ‘religion’ instead of eradicating the term. The call for eliminating the term ‘religion’ implies the recognition of all traditions in terms of ‘faith’ and ‘cumulative tradition’ ruling out their terms developed to express themselves as unified entities. Thus, it becomes a daunting rather disapproving activity as

⁵⁸Ibid., 19-38.

⁵⁹Ibid., 39.

⁶⁰Ibid., 48.

⁶¹Ibid., 48.

⁶²Brain K. Smith, “Exorcising the Transcendence: Strategies for Defining Hinduism and Religion,” *History of Religions* 27, no.1 (Aug1987): 32-55.

the proponents of other religions, although disliking 'religion' would not be eager to leave their conceptualizations.

Moreover, *religio* in its original sense can be retained as the proper meaning of religion. As Frithjof Schuon believes "religion is still related to *religio*, to all that binds man to 'God, to the ultimate Principle.'"⁶³ Schuon is not alone in maintaining this; many other scholars⁶⁴ also express the same idea and they could help revive the appropriate conceptualization of 'religion.'

g. Another very significant issue raised by Smith is the distinction between the 'religion' and 'religious.' While suggesting that we get rid of the noun, he advocates retaining the adjective, arguing that human beings are "everywhere and have always been religious."⁶⁵ Simultaneously he points out that being religious does not presuppose adherence to a particular institutionalized religion. He points out:

"...the adjective religious has been retained in use even while the noun [religion] is rejected. This has to do with the contention that living religiously is an attribute of persons. The attribute arises not because those persons participate in some entity called religion, but because they participate in what I have called transcendence."⁶⁶

In his lecture, delivered in 1964 in India, Smith employs Christian and Muslim adjectives to prove his point that the adjectives call for being more faithful, more Christ-like, more submissive and more committed to the divine commandments respectively unlike the related nouns. If these are conceived as adjectives then the question ought to be 'how' Christian, Muslim, Buddhist one is, instead of 'whether' he/she is Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist and so on. And this apparently simple change leads to dynamism and consciousness of responsibility in a person, replacing the stagnant and consoling adherence protected by the noun.

Smith provides the linguistic arguments in order to establish his thesis, highlighting that the Latin and Greek languages tend to pluralize the adjectives as well as nouns. Owing to this fact, King James Version translated *Christianoias* Christians⁶⁷ (noun because adjectives are not plural in English). Here Smith is particularly talking about "Christian" and "Muslim" and he brings the evidence⁶⁸ from early Christian writings and The Holy Qur'ān. He concludes the argument by saying that "the noun is comforting, the adjective demanding. The noun is static the adjective dynamic. The noun asserts the adjective pleads.

⁶³Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (Lahore: Sohail Academy, 2001), 3

⁶⁴For instance, see Huston Smith, John Herlihy, Hossein Nasr and many others.

⁶⁵Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 18.

⁶⁶Ibid., 176.

⁶⁷Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, 103.

⁶⁸Ibid. Smith quotes St. Ignatius from early Christians and the example of Ibrahim (A.S) from The Holy Qur'ān.

The noun is human, the adjective divine.”⁶⁹ Smith's thesis of discriminating between noun and adjective leads to far-reaching consequences theologically as well. He attributes truth to the personal religiosity i.e. no abstract, impersonal and systemized religion can be true or false. Rather he says, “The only question that concerns either God, or me, or my neighbor is whether my Christianity is true”⁷⁰. He also refers to the Qur'ānic verses which mean to say that on “the Day of Judgment [God] will see not abstract religious entities on trial before the throne, but men and women.”⁷¹ But it is noteworthy as well that ultimately the adjectives do not save rather it is God who saves through His love and blessing. The adjectives are not “offerings” to God but “joyous response” to His initiative.

Finally, on the basis of all the conceptual problems mentioned above, Smith characterizes the term ‘religion’ as “confusing, unnecessary and distorting.” The inadequacy of the concept leads to the intellectual dilemma of “the relation between the many and the One... the historical change and abiding truth, the world and God.”⁷² The solution to such a dilemma is to revise the categories of intellectual discourse and move towards better alternative. “The concept of religion and the religions, we conclude, both in practice is being dropped in part and principle ought to be dropped altogether.”⁷³

To suggest the alternatives is a challenging task as it not only necessitates conceptualizations more precise and adequate as well as comprehensive than the previous ones but also demands the new categories to entertain the dimensions neglected by the old ones. Wilfred Smith realizes the challenge fully and suggests the dichotomy of “faith and cumulative tradition” to replace ‘religion.’ Simultaneously he leaves the matter in the hands of the future saying that “we do not yet know how men and women can live most truly with the new self-conscious knowledge; whether this particularizes form for it will serve.”⁷⁴

4. Analysis of Smith's Thesis

Many modern scholars considered the opinion of Wilfred Smith regarding the ambiguity of ‘religion’ and analyzed Smith's stance in their writings. Mahmut Aydin, in his essay “A Muslim pluralist: Jalaluddin Rumi” holds that Rumi shares the idea of abolishing ‘religion’ with Smith. As Smith sees the externalia of religion to be discriminating and responsible for producing hatred, similarly Rumi says: “shape is an obstacle and road block. Look beyond the shape of things and behold the meaning.”⁷⁵ The influence of Smith's thought is visible in the thinking patterns of many modern scholars.

⁶⁹Cracknel, *Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Reader*, 191.

⁷⁰Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, 68.

⁷¹Ibid., 70.

⁷²Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 153.

⁷³Ibid., 153.

⁷⁴Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 96.

⁷⁵Paul. F. Knitter, (ed.) *The Myth of Religious Superiority A Multifaith Exploration* (New York: Orbis Books Maryknoll, 2005), 232.

Timothy Fitzgerald has elaborated and extended Smith's thesis by asserting that "[t]he construction of 'religion' and 'religions' as global, cross-cultural objects of study has been part of a wider historical process of Western imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism."⁷⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith expresses exactly the same opinion as that of Smith; "Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy."⁷⁷ He elaborates this issue further in his article "Religion, Religions, Religious."⁷⁸ William Arnal and Willi Braun also seem to be deeply influenced by Smith's ideas. Robert D. Young passionately advocates Smith's point of view and admits that Smith's thesis touches his own. He appreciates Wilfred Smith saying that "[b]y his scholarly analysis of the noun "religion," he has given historical approach for saying that in the most Christian centuries, theologians did not consider Christianity a reified entity, marked off by doctrines and organization from the "outside" world. This is an answer from history to theologians of exclusivism."⁷⁹ He concludes later that taking Smith's opinion seriously can open the avenues to interfaith understanding.

Ninian Smart also realizes that many Eastern traditions like Confucianism and Buddhism do not easily fall within the Western definition of religion but he wants nevertheless to retain the term. According to him, "our descriptions of religion should therefore be sensitive and as acceptable as is possible (in conformity with scholarly opinion) to most educated adherents."⁸⁰ Conscious of the flames inherent in the Western treatments of religion, Smart defines the term in his essay *the pros and cons of thinking of Religion as Tradition*. His arguments are worth mentioning hence they are quoted below.

Where, however, the quantity of data is so enormous, there is an advantage in appropriate simplification. We can avoid some of the problems of oversimplification by making use of the plural of the 'isms' Buddhisms, Judaisms, Christianities, etc. in order to remind ourselves of the internal pluralism of the labeled traditions... So, though there are valid criticisms of older ways of dealing with the traditions, the concept of traditions' analysis is not without merit and there are conveniences in adopting this approach.⁸¹

Furthermore, he cognizes that religion is an outcome of the Western Reificationist Trend but simultaneously says that "religions themselves have adopted the categories of the Western historians, orientalist and missionaries, tending to model non-Christian

⁷⁶Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

⁷⁷Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), xi.

⁷⁸Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

⁷⁹Robert D. Young, *Encounter with World Religions* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 159.

⁸⁰Ninian Smart, *Reflections in the Mirror of Religion* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 190.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 200.

religions on the example of Christianity.”⁸² He cites the example of the *World Fellowship of Buddhists* for illustration.

Seshagiri Rao advocates Smith's stance to condemn the reification of religiosity by bringing the example of the psychologists' quest for entities like intelligence or memory. But with time, these concepts have been discredited. He says bluntly, “It is equally true of religiousness. Having “reified” the religious quality of life into something called “religion,” scholars have been searching for it; no wonder they have been frustrated and disappointed in their attempts. The author's argument in this regard is so persuasive that after one has read the book, one is apt to regard it as an intellectual sin to persist in the use of the concepts “religion and religions.” It may not be very long before these concepts are completely discredited by scholarship.”⁸³

5. Conclusion

Wilfred Cantwell Smith considers ‘religion’ to be an obstacle in interreligious dialogue as no consensus upon ‘what religion refers to’ blocks the way to mutual understanding. John Milbank in his essay entitled *The End of Dialogue* highlights this problem by saying that “no known definition of religion has achieved even working consensus among religious scholars.”⁸⁴ He employs this argument to prove that interreligious dialogue is not possible. Smith's suggestion could be probably a trial to counter such challenges but still there are solutions more practical and convenient than discarding ‘religion.’

First of all, it is noteworthy that ‘religion’ implying diverse connotations reflects the diversity latent within human nature. Religion is essentially a phenomenon of human involvement so it must represent different ways in which human beings respond and react. This representation necessitates variety in meaning of ‘religion.’ As ‘Attas says about the Islamic counterpart of ‘religion’ “...the apparent contrariness in its basic meanings is indeed not due to vagueness, rather due to the contrariness in human nature itself...and its power to reflect human nature faithfully is itself clear demonstration of its lucidity and veracity and authenticity in conveying truth.”⁸⁵

Secondly, it is possible as well to rehearse some of the definitions of religion which neglect essential elements of religious life and emphasize peripheral issues. The definition of Whitehead is an apparent example which rests upon solitude (the matter of negligible significance in religious life). So, instead of dropping the term ‘religion,’ it might be more beneficial to develop criteria for its working definition.

The advocates of interreligious understanding must agree that religion is the principal modality of human existence which embraces all other human dimensions. The attempts to

⁸²Smart, *Reflections in the Mirror of Religion*, 200.

⁸³K. L. Seshagiri Rao, “Review [untitled],” *Philosophy East and West* 18, no. ½ (Jan. - Apr., 1968): 85-91.

⁸⁴James Wiggins, *In Praise of Religious Diversity*, 100.

⁸⁵Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 42.

reduce religion to any other domain of human life like history, sociology, and psychology or doctrine, etcetera, destroy its meaning altogether. Religion is the vital force that stimulates not only human actions but also emotions and passions. Keeping this in view, the attempts to define 'religion' should not be partial and discipline-oriented. Moreover, the scholars engaged in the enterprise of interreligious encounters are to be well aware of the counterparts of 'religion' in nonwestern civilizations and their adequate usage should be made as per requirement.

Hans Küng's approach is quite practical and worthy to be considered in this regard. He conceives the conceptualization of religion adequately but does not ascribe finality or absolute status to any of the working definitions. He realizes that religion is always more than what words can grasp. He considers religion to be analogous but not equivocal because it carries out the mighty task to swathe many dissimilar concepts from monotheism all the way down to atheism. So Küng's understanding of 'religion' can serve as a clue to its better apprehension. He says:

Religion is a believing view of life, approach of life, way of life and therefore a fundamental pattern embracing the individual and the society, man and the world through which a person (though only partially conscious of this) sees and experiences, thinks and feels, acts and suffers everything. It is a transcendently grounded and immanently operated system of coordinates, by which man orients himself intellectually, emotionally and existentially.⁸⁶

Lastly, who knows whether the new proposed categories would be able to gain unanimous consensus of scholars and public or not? Particularly when it is conceived that human nature is intrinsically diverse and apprehends the same categories in contrasting ways at times. So, it cannot be taken for granted that humanity worldwide will rush to replace 'religion' with 'faith' and 'cumulative tradition' (possessing universal connotations). In this skeptic age of post-modernism when there is no 'big picture'⁸⁷ and all the grounds of epistemology are shaken, it would not be intelligent to call for such a drastic change. Smith himself realizes the plight when he says, "The drastic individualism of modern epistemology is one of its crucial weaknesses."⁸⁸ To suggest the quest for new universal categories without solving the dilemma of individual epistemology is irrational.

The proposed categories can only be universal if the epistemology could gain universally authoritative grounds. Since the Modern Western Academia refutes revelation as a source of true knowledge, it is impossible to reach unifying thinking patterns and concepts. In order to develop unanimously agreed categories, it is essential to have some firm objective principles of ultimate authority which belong only to the Ultimate Truth (*al-*

⁸⁶Hans Küng, *Christianity and World Religions Paths to Dialogue*, xvii.

⁸⁷As announced by Richard Rorty on the cover of *The University of Chicago Magazine*. See Muhammad Suheyb Umar, *The Religious Other Towards A Muslim Theology of Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2008), 28.

⁸⁸Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 155.

Haqq). And these principles are crystallized in the form of revelation. So, epistemology must not be based upon human efforts as they are intrinsically subjective and fall short of being universal. And Smith realizes this when he says, "Truth is divine; yet words are human. Even concepts are human. There is surely a limit to the capacity of words and concepts to encapsulate truth."⁸⁹ Consequently, there is no way out of particularism of individual concepts except returning to the traditional concept of revelation which surely can lead to universalism.

Another dangerous feature of Smith's thought is anti-essentialism which sounds comforting but has drastic consequences, both intellectually and practically. The religious traditions cannot maintain their existence unless their adherents retain some principles as essential ones. Although religions undergo changes in the course of their history, yet they preserve their essence for the sake of distinction from other traditions. For instance, there are some features which link religion of the twentieth century Muslims to that of the companions of the Holy Prophet (SAW). So likewise it is necessary to affirm that all the religious traditions (as their adherents affirm) possess some vital inflexible elements along with some fluid ones subject to amendment for the sake of continuity of the religious traditions. In this context, the stance of Seyyed Hossein Nasr is worthy to be mentioned, "For Islam, the crushing evidence is of permanence, that which comprises Islam's central reality. The Ka'bah is still the Ka'bah, the pilgrimage is what the Prophet (SAW) performed, the daily prayers are what he did, the *Sharī'ah* as codified on the basis of the Qur'ān and prophetic *Sunnah* still defines the reality of the Muslim's religious life... I do not say that there is a monolithic Islam, but what I want to say is that the idea of permanence in Islam permeates the whole of Islamic consciousness about itself despite this diversity of interpretation."⁹⁰

The loss of authority and obsession with anti-essentialism of Smith's thoughts has led him to a precarious conclusion about religions. He clearly claims, "I personally believe that if one is going to talk of religions at all, then one must recognize that every religion is new every morning...[R]eligious truth is, I suggest, a matter of what is in actuality; and therefore, also, of what has been, and what will be."⁹¹ The implications of such a belief are mighty and perhaps not favored by the adherents of the major world religions. Religious truth is ascribed to the individual's religion here, and doing so eliminates the possibility of any objective criterion of truth. Although God is equated with The Ultimate Truth⁹² in

⁸⁹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, 83.

⁹⁰Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Response to Hans Kung's Paper on Christian Muslim Dialogue," *Muslim World*, 77 (April 1987): 97.

⁹¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, 75-76.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 85, Smith says while talking about religious truth, "If God is not the truth, what is God, and what is truth?...Wherever truth is found, there is God. And wherever truth is stated, there God is speaking."

Smith's theory but again how to know the divine truth is through individual actions.⁹³ So in this case the quest for truth becomes an absurd effort. The essentials of religion cannot change rather the patterns of lived religions vary significantly.

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⁹³Ibid., 85-86, Smith devises the empirical rather perhaps pragmatic standards to evaluate that whether the statement belongs to God or not. He proclaims that a statement "can be said to *become* the word of God only if it transforms personal life." He also says that "wherever a right action is enjoined, there God is speaking. Any moral injunction, insofar as it is truly moral and correct, is the word of God." italics added.

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