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## **Islamic Studies and Inter-Religious Understanding in the US**

The field of Religious Studies in Euro-America, like all scholarly pursuits, aspires toward objectivity. It differs from the teaching of religion within a particular faith tradition in that it does not promote specific ideas or actions as true or false, or right or wrong. Instead, the goal of Religious Studies is to foster an appreciation of and respect for various religious traditions and an understanding of their roles in society. As such, Religious Studies is non-normative. But this does not mean that Religious Studies is value-free. In fact, the desire to foster understanding of different faith traditions is itself based upon a value: that inter-faith understanding is not only possible, but good; indeed, it is an integral part of a pluralist, democratic society. Unquestionably, there are some scholars who violate the spirit of Religious Studies, particularly when it comes to the study of Islam. However, like the terrorists, they are the exception to the rule. The vast majority of scholars of Islam in the U.S. adhere to the standards of Religious Studies described above. In this paper I will argue for the effectiveness of the academic study of religion in fostering inter-religious understanding, particularly with regard to Islam. While there are not statistics available, there are numerous examples of the

impact of Religious Studies in this regard. I will begin with a description of the development of Religious Studies, and then focus on the work of two of the major contributors to the field. I will conclude with some observations on the effectiveness of these methodologies, particularly in the post-9/11 context, drawn from my own twenty-year experience in Islamic Studies in the U.S.

### **The Discipline of Religious Studies<sup>1</sup>**

The academic discipline of Religious Studies arose in Europe in the context of four historical developments: the introduction of the printing press, the development of the Protestant Reformation, imperial explorations, and the rise of Enlightenment thinking. The printing press was introduced in Europe in the mid-fifteenth century. In this deeply religious world, it was natural that the first printed book was the Latin Christian Bible. The effort to produce a printed text, however, raised questions concerning which version of the Bible to put into print. The Bible had been passed on for the previous fourteen centuries through handwritten manuscripts, and there were variations among the many texts extant at the time. Scholars, therefore, began the task of comparing the various manuscripts. They sought to determine the sources of their variations, and produce a text that was accurate according to the earliest available version. This activity, in turn, raised questions concerning the sources and accuracy of some of the translations. The Bible had been translated into Latin from its original Hebrew and Greek as early as the second century C.E., but officially in the fifth century C.E., and it was recognized that there were several sources for even the

earliest translations. Those sources therefore also had to be examined. That entailed significant philological study, since scholars were eager to transmit the meanings of terms current at the time of the Bible's first commission to writing. These efforts formed the first steps away from the assumption, characteristic of theological studies, that timeless meanings were could be captured and transmitted from generation to generation.

The challenges of establishing an authoritative text and philological questions were compounded by questions raised during the Protestant Reformation. In the sixteenth century various reformers, led by Martin Luther, disputed the teachings of Roman orthodoxy. The Roman authorities based their teachings on their interpretations of scripture; it was up to the Protestants, then, to justify their innovative interpretations, demonstrating again that more than one interpretation of a text is possible. Eventually, the developing fields of textual (source and literary) criticism and philology, led by Protestant theologians, gave rise to philosophical discussion of hermeneutics (the study of interpretation), another significant step in the development of Religious Studies.

European states' explorations beyond their shores, beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gave further impetus to the development of the field. Until this time the only attention paid by European Christian scholars to religions other than their own had been efforts to demonstrate their errors. The paradigm of this genre was Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, written in the

mid-thirteenth century to help missionaries combat the arguments of Muslims and Jews.

But the explorers' mandate was not religious, as such. Their task was to find sources of wealth accessible to their European sponsors. In the process, however, they discovered entirely unfamiliar cultures, as well. Their reports spurred some scholars to describe religious differences and others to speculate on the very nature of religion. James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) and Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (1916) are classic examples of these efforts. The field of anthropology developed in this context, with the goal of understanding human beings, their cultures, languages, and religions. Early representatives of this discipline undoubtedly betrayed ethnocentrism, including preferences for their own religions, and their research methods were primitive. Yet the goal of describing others' religions (among other aspects of culture) as objectively as possible, in order to contribute to understanding of the phenomenon of religion as such, became central to Religious Studies.

Ultimately, it was the development of modernity that established Religious Studies in the West as an independent discipline. In Europe's pre-modern era, political power was legitimated through religious authority. From the time Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne (800 C.E.), the church had theoretically been the source of political legitimacy. But as various regions gained economic independence from the central authorities, they demanded political autonomy. As with the Protestant Reformation, since legitimation of

the central authorities' power was based on official interpretations of scripture, it was up to the "seceders" to either reject religion or defend their positions with new interpretations of scripture. They chose the latter option. Henry VIII's legitimacy was based on his newly created Church of England, various Germanic states became Lutheran, Switzerland followed the interpretations of yet another reformer, John Calvin, and so on. By 1555, after decades of inter-communal strife, the Peace of Augsburg established the principle *cujus regio, ejus religio*: "To whomever belongs political sovereignty [in a region, also] belongs religious authority."

Far from a separation of religion and politics, this was nonetheless a dismembering of the previously monolithic Eurochristian religio-political complex. It also demonstrated the fallibility of traditional faith-based interpretations. The existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations highlighted the human element in interpretations of scripture, and encouraged thinkers to focus on how people reason. The need to demonstrate rules of careful reasoning became a serious concern. Thus, the preeminent modernist philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) undertook to demonstrate the circumstances under which reason could be trusted.

In this context, the very nature of political responsibility was examined systematically. Under the pre-modern system, people's responsibility was to obey the clerks of the realm, often the clergy (the two terms are etymologically related) under pain of eternal punishment.

Obedience was owed because the leader was under divine sanction. The modern age, by contrast, is characterized as one in which sovereignty ultimately resides with the people, who are described as being endowed with dignity, freedom, and the wits to order their own lives under normal circumstances. Since their efforts are most effective collectively, it was determined that delegating some of their authority to a leader was to their benefit. As expressed in the United States' Declaration of Independence from Britain (1776), the source of human dignity was believed to be divine. It was considered "self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, [and] that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Yet religion had legitimated sovereigns who denied many of these rights. The political thinkers of Europe's modernity, therefore, based their revolutionary thoughts on what they believed was valid human reason. This is the source of separation of religious authority from political power (often indiscriminately called secularism) in the modern world.

The development of Religious Studies received major impetus from modernity's heightened confidence in human reason. As intellectual disciplines flourished, so did rational methodologies. Care was taken to examine subjects empirically, gather facts, be skeptical of traditional explanations, and to reason inductively, based on observable phenomena. These methods were applied to the field of Religious Studies, and the wealth pouring in from the colonies -- both information concerning different

peoples and financial wealth -- allowed for the full blown development of the field of Religious Studies in Europe.

### **Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Pioneer in Religious Studies**

One of the towering figures in the development of Religious Studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Wilfred Cantwell Smith (d. 2000). An expert in Islamic Studies with years of experience in the Muslim world, Smith developed important and influential ideas on the nature of Religious Studies. He said that "religion is best understood as the living, vital faith of individual persons rather than as an abstract set of ideas and doctrines." This, in contrast to the classical Orientalist approach to study of the religious Other: scrutiny of classical – and often archaic – documents. Instead of resorting to ancient texts, Smith said that "to 'understand' a religious tradition..., one must achieve a degree of empathy with the situation of the participant in that tradition...."<sup>2</sup> In his last article – still unpublished – "The Christ of History and the Jesus of the Historians", Smith elaborated:

We have not understood any action or any saying in another century or another culture until we have realized that we ourselves, had we been in that situation, might well have done or said exactly that. Not that we would have done it; that would mean denying human freedom. We must simply appreciate, must feel and make our readers feel, that of the various possibilities open to us at that point, this particular thought or move or comment would have seemed attractive to us,

and perceive the reasons why that would be so. In my own work over the years I have repeatedly asserted, "The study of religion is the study of persons."

This was a groundbreaking advance in Religious Studies, and provided the basis for some of the most important work that has been done in Religious Studies in general, and Islamic Studies in particular. W.C. Smith founded McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies, was director of Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, established a department of Comparative Religion at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then returned to Harvard to serve as head of the Committee on the Study of Religion at Harvard, where he was also a member of the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

There are people who believe Smith's methodology goes beyond a simple pedagogical tool – that it goes beyond academic neutrality and constitutes, in fact, a call for religious inclusivism, based on metaphysical claims. They believe that Smith not only teaches inter-religious understanding, but inclusivity, as well. His critics say that if asserting the validity of only one religion is a religious claim, then asserting that all religions are somehow correct is also a religious claim. This is a valid observation. Smith does claim that all religions are somehow

correct. But Smith's methodology remains grounded in reason.

Smith said that the goal of Religious Studies is to understand "mankind's global religious history."<sup>3</sup> In *Towards a World Theology* (1981) he argued that "Christians have a moral duty to respect the identity of others with whom this world is shared."<sup>4</sup> He was convinced that all peoples have access to religious truth. Just before his death, he wrote, "No one, no group, no era has had or could possibly have more than a limited apprehension of ultimate truth."<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, he wrote, "I...am not able to think of any reason that one might reasonably have for denying that God has played in human history a role in and through the Qur'an, in the Muslim case, comparable to the role in the Christian case in and through Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Convinced of the universality of religion, then, Smith believed the study of other religions was not actually the study of the "other" but the study of our "own group -- ideally mankind...."<sup>7</sup> That is, Smith's work assumed – in his words – "that faith and tradition are universal and that [human beings] and God are one the world over."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, to study history is to study religion. He said: "My history is the world history of religion, and my theology is world theology."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere: "The religious history of the world is the history of *us*. Some of us have been Muslims, some Christians [etc.].... Yet it is a common history for all that."<sup>10</sup>

Smith's worldview was one of a single body of religious knowledge, expressed through a shared human history. He believed that this unity and commonality have profound implications both for the understanding of Truth – with a “capital T” – and understanding the religious Other. And it is based on his own assumption of transcendent Truth, and conviction that the common human response to the experience of the transcendent is faith. Faith for him was a basic human quality: “Faith is not something extra in human life, but is essential.” He believed, in fact, that lack of belief in the transcendent (which he called “secularity”) is “the bizarre addendum.”<sup>11</sup> Lack of religious faith was, for Smith, virtually incomprehensible and, in any case, so rare as to be statistically insignificant.

The study of world religions, therefore, was a reflection of Smith's religious convictions; his academic life was indeed his religious life. But his goal was never to minimize the differences among religious traditions, much less to change people's religious convictions. In fact, he was adamantly opposed to missionary efforts at conversion, and consistently taught that people should live fully within their own traditions. As his son described Smith's approach: “[H]is example – what he lived, taught, recommended, and inspired – was to stay firmly grounded in one's own tradition...and, from there, to reach across to those in other traditions – to speak to them, to love them, to celebrate life's personal plurality. To be bettered, not lessened, by differences.”<sup>12</sup> He argued for greater openness to the insights of others for the purpose of seeing truth from a different angle and for enhancing what we individually

and collectively are able to grasp. Smith did not believe that Truth itself is relative, but he did believe that individual perceptions or expressions of Truth are limited. They are relative to people's particular histories, but they are nonetheless valid, for all their limitations and relativity. They are simply part of the whole, just as our own histories are part of world history. That's why we need not abandon our own religious contexts.

Thus, according to Smith, the study of the religious Other can expand our particular faith parameters. Smith's 1981 Towards a World Theology encourages scholars to enlarge their vision to encompass a more pluralist understanding of truth than is possible through the structure of any one religious tradition.<sup>13</sup>

### **Refinements of the Methodology: Jonathan Z. Smith**

The goal of developing empathy with the religious Other, to be open to greater perspective on Truth – to "be bettered by difference," as Wilfred Cantwell Smith puts it, is noble and generally attractive to students in my experience. It is particularly effective with teaching about Islam's core values of justice and mercy. Students inevitably respond sympathetically to examples of Islam in action, such as charitable work and struggles against injustice. Muslim contributions to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, for example, approving nods.

But what do we do about the atrocities committed in the name of religion? How do we approach the religious Other when that Other commits acts that would be

considered repugnant in any tradition? For that discussion I will turn to another major figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Religious Studies, Jonathan Z. Smith (no relation to Wilfred Cantwell Smith). Jonathan Z. Smith wrote a fascinating article in 1982 in which he described briefly the development of Religious Studies in the context of the Enlightenment. Identifying the essential rubric of the Enlightenment as “faith in intelligibility,”<sup>14</sup> he cited Montaigne’s insistence on the “rules of reason” in judging any culture – or, in this case, religious grouping.<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith then went on to discuss the Jonestown Massacre in Guyana in 1978, and the failure of scholars of religion to deal with it. “The press, by and large,” he said, predictably “featured the pornography of Jonestown...:”<sup>16</sup> the body count, the sick excesses of the perpetrators, the tears of the families of the victims, etc. Religious leaders like Billy Graham distanced themselves from Jonestown, claiming that James Jones “was a slave of a diabolical supernatural power from which he refused to be set free.”<sup>17</sup>

J.Z. Smith described this dismissal of Jones as simply an agent of the devil – evil incarnate -- as “[giving] way to the forces of unreason.”<sup>18</sup>

For many [scholars], Jones’s declarations that he was a Marxist, a communist, one who rejected the “opiate” of religion, were greeted with relief. He was not, after all, religious. Hence, there was no professional obligation to interpret him...For others, it was not to be talked about because it revealed what had been concealed from public, academic discussion for a

century – that religion has rarely been a positive, liberal force. Religion is not nice; it has been responsible for more death and suffering than any other human activity.<sup>19</sup>

The academy therefore simply “reasoned” Jonestown away. For Jonathan Smith, this was an abdication of our academic responsibility. It was the failure to remain true to the basis of the scholarly study of religion: that “nothing human is foreign to me,” that what human beings do is intelligible -- not necessarily intelligent -- but intelligible. . J.Z. Smith's implication is clear: the more important the events are, the more critical it is for us – as scholars – to make them intelligible, to find their sources, to explain how these events happened, and how people were led to such self destructive behavior.

In Jonestown, Guyana in 1978: 914 dead -- men, women, children, and animals.. In 2001 we were faced with a series of events of far greater proportions. Over 3000 killed, and thousands more threatened. Understandably, we find religious leaders distancing themselves from the acts of the terrorists of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Muslims worldwide condemned the atrocities as a violation of everything Islam stands for. Nevertheless, the attacks were committed in the name of Islam. The perpetrators believed they were en route to heaven, carrying out a divine mandate. Just as both professors Smith taught, it became our responsibility as scholars to get beyond the revulsion, to study seriously, and to find the rationality in these acts. This is not a pleasant side of religion, but there is no denying that it is an

important aspect of religion -- and one we have the responsibility to investigate rationally. Wilfred Cantwell Smith said we have a moral responsibility to study all religious communities because they are all a part of religious history. And he said that this study must be carried on “in a critical disciplined, intellectually rigorous, empirical, academic way.”<sup>20</sup> We must study religious traditions “without giving up critical and historical analysis.”<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith said we have an intellectual responsibility to do the same thing.

### **The Effectiveness of Religious Studies**

Over a period of twenty years of teaching about Islam in the U.S., I have found the methodologies developed by both Professors Smith to be extremely effective. W.C. Smith's methodology is most amenable to comparative studies of values. As noted, students respond enthusiastically to core Islamic values. J.Z. Smith's extension of the methodology becomes most effective when dealing with the negative aspects of religiously-rationalized behavior. By examining the socioeconomic and political contexts from which these acts emerge, students can indeed understand the terrorists' decisions. Comparing these actions with the values espoused by devout people, students can recognize that such acts may be religious in a sense, but they are religious failings, not successes.

But it remains necessary, I believe, to stress positive examples of Islamic values in action, rather than simply rejecting atrocities as un-Islamic and reasoning them away

sociologically. Authoritative condemnations of terrorism are effective intellectually, but empathy is gained through living examples of Islam. For that reason, I present in class efforts such as the South African Muslims' anti-Apartheid struggle and the many Muslims who reached out to assist the victims of 9/11. Students respond with sympathy for the victims of socioeconomic and political injustice that make the choice of terrorists comprehensible. But they respond with empathy and support for those Muslims who move beyond victimhood, and attempt publicly to put Islamic virtues into action, even in today's difficult circumstances. As I mentioned, there may be no statistical measurements of the success of these pedagogical efforts. But in the U.S., students have another way to demonstrate success: t-shirts. I knew they had learned something last semester when the students in my Modern Islam course named themselves "Team Ijtihad" and had t-shirts printed. The front of the shirts read: "Struggling to establish justice in the world." The back: "It's a tawqā thing."

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<sup>1</sup> This description is taken from my introduction to Ghulam Haider Aasi, Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: A Study of Ibn Hazm's *Kitab al-Fasl fi'l-Milal wa'l-Nihal* (Islamabad: IIIT and IRI, 1999):ix-xvii.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ageofsig.org/people/wcsmith/>

<sup>3</sup> Frank Whaling, "Introduction," The World's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies (Essays in honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith) (New York: Crossroad, 1984):9.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ageofsig.org/people/wcsmith/>

<sup>5</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Christ of History and the Jesus of the Historians." Unpublished ms., p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Idolatry in Comparative Perspective." John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds, The Myth of Christian Uniqueness (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987): 64.

<sup>7</sup> W.C. Smith, "The Teaching of Religion: Academic Rigour, and Personal Involvement." Harvard MS; unpublished, 1967. See Whaling, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Whaling, 17.

<sup>9</sup> "The Christ of History," p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> W.C. Smith, "Interpreting Religious Interrelations: An Historian's View of Christian and Muslim." Richard W. Rousseau, ed. Christianity and Islam: The Struggling Dialogue (Scranton, PA: Ridge Row Press, 1985):12-13.

<sup>11</sup> W.C. Smith, Faith and Belief (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979):136.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Cantwell Smith, "Remarks on the Opening of the Wilfred and Muriel Smith Collection at the Oviatt Library of the California State University at Northridge, April 14, 2000." Unpublished. P. 3.

<sup>13</sup> W.C. Smith, Towards a World Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 116-17. Smith stressed that were such a theology to actually emerge, it would in some ways transcend our particularist belief systems – in his case, of course, Christian. But it would neither weaken nor dilute them. As he put it, we must think about a theology that is Christian, plus..., or Muslim, plus..., etc. He was convinced that this kind of common endeavor was truly beginning to take place, and that it represented a convergence of history and theology. "It hardly behooves a Christian to discriminate too sharply between the historical and the theological level," he pointed out, "if it indeed be in history that God acts." ("Religious Interrelations," 8) The theologian must of necessity be an historian, which of course Smith understood himself to be, as the true historian should be unable to avoid the fact that his or her endeavor must also be theological. (W.C. Smith, "Theology and the World's Religious History," Leonard Swidler, ed. Toward a Universal Theology of Religion [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987], 67-71.) Just as the tasks of studying theology and history may be essentially the same, so speaking truly about what one understands of God has to be done in the context of the interpretation of the history of all religious life. (Ibid., 55) Because religious traditions have participated in common human history, each one in its own way, theology too – or the way religions think about themselves -- must move toward that kind of mutuality.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones" in Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1982):104.

<sup>15</sup> J.Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," 105.

<sup>16</sup> J.Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," 109.

<sup>17</sup> J.Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," 110.

<sup>18</sup> J.Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," 110.

<sup>19</sup> J.Z. Smith, "The Devil in Mr. Jones," 110.

<sup>20</sup> W.C. Smith, "The Teaching of Religion: Academic Rigour, and Personal Involvement." Harvard MS; unpublished, 1967. See Whaling, 18.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.ageofsig.org/people/scsmith/>