

# Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Religious Faith and Truth

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## الملخص

وقد عرف علماء المسلمين وخبراء الدراسات الإسلامية والأديان منذ زمان طويل ويل فريد كينويل سميث Wilfred Cantwell Smith ومؤلفاته التي تركز على تطور دراسات الأديان بصفة عامة والدراسات الإسلامية بصفة خاصة. وعلى الأقل هناك أربع من العلماء المعروفين الذين اعترفوا بكفائته العلمية فقد قالوا بأن سميث أعاننا عن طريق نظرياته عن الأديان على فهم حياة دين الإنسان على أساس تطلعاته في إيجاد التعاون التفاهم وتبادل الاحترام، وبهذا فإن لسميث تأثيره الكبير في دراسة الاستشراق كما انه قد أسهم في إثراء أهمية الأيدلوجية الدينية.

ولا شك أن هناك حقيقة بأن المهتمين بدراسة الأديان اعترفوا بإسهامات سميث العظيمة في فهم الإسلام.

ويهدف هذا البحث إلى بلورة نظريات سميث عن الإيمان وصحة الدين والذي لها أهم كبرى في دراسات الأديان كما أن في هذا البحث ذكر لنظرياته عن الدين والإيمان بالديانة الأخرى.

## Abstrak

Sarjana-sarjana Muslim maupun sarjana-sarjana studi keislaman dan studi agama-agama telah lama mengenal Wilfred Cantwell Smith beserta karya-karya tulisnya yang telah dipersembahkan bagi perkembangan studi

agama-agama pada umumnya dan bagi studi Islam pada khususnya.

Minimal ada empat sarjana terkenal yang telah mengakui kepiawaian dia. Mereka antara lain mengatakan bahwa melalui konsep-konsep tentang agama dan agama-agama yang dikemukakannya, Smith telah menolong kita memahami kehidupan keagamaan umat manusia berdasarkan keinginannya akan tercapainya saling tolong menolong dan saling pengertian serta menghargai antar umat beragama yang beraneka ragam. Smith juga telah banyak berpengaruh besar pada studi ketimuran dan teologi dan telah turut menyemarakkan pentingnya ideologi keagamaan.

Tidaklah dapat disangkal lagi adanya satu kenyataan bahwa para peminat studi agama-agama harus mengakui kontribusi Smith yang sangat luar biasa bagi pemahaman terhadap Islam.

Makalah ini merupakan satu usaha untuk mengelaborasi konsep-konsep Smith tentang kepercayaan dan kebenaran agama yang sangat krusial bagi studi agama. Juga dikemukakan konsep-konsepnya tentang agama serta kepercayaan kepada agama lain.

## A. Introduction

**W**ilfred Cantwell Smith is undoubtedly believed to have given significant contribution to the field of religious studies, with special reference to his study of Islam. He was a student of Islam and advocate of inter-religious dialogue. At least, four experts of religious studies give their commentaries on him.

In his article "Religious Pluralism", John Hick writes: Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his work on the concept of religion and of religions has been responsible, more than any other single individual, for the change which has taken place within a single generation in the way in which many of us perceive the religious life of mankind.<sup>1</sup>

Sheila McDonough, a specialist in Islam at Concordia University, said that Smith wanted to help people think about religion and the fact that it can serve good or bad ends, and he wanted different religion adherents to work together, understand each other and appreciate each other.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>John Hick, "Religious Pluralism". In Frank Whaling, ed., *The World's Religious Traditions, Current Perspectives in Religious Studies: Essays in Honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1984), p. 174.

<sup>2</sup>*The Gazette*, (Montreal, Thursday, February 10, 2000).



Charles J. Adams writes:

Smith has made one of the foremost contributions to the understanding of Islam in this generation, and his influence has touched many others in both oriental and theological studies. His works that treat of trends in contemporary Islamic world rank as standard reference volumes, impressive both for their breadth of learning and the acuteness of their analysis.<sup>3</sup>

H.A.R. Gibb tends to believe that in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's treatment of the modern Islamic movement in India ... the class content of religious ideology is constantly brought to light. Passing his facts through a fine sieve of doctrinal analysis, sharpened by the dogmatism of our younger socialist, it is not surprising that he finds little good grain and a vast quantity of chaff.<sup>4</sup>

More than that, as a matter of fact, Wilfred Cantwell Smith has been familiar to the students of religious studies in some western and eastern countries including Indonesia.

### **B. His Life**

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was born in Toronto on July 21, 1916. He was born into a Christian family that had religious background and academic milieu. His father, Victor Arnold Smith was a successful self-made businessman and was an influential elder of the Knox Presbyterian Church. His mother, a classics professor, was a US citizen who came to Canada when she married. She took his education well beyond the confines of Upper Canada College, where he was a student. When Smith was seventeen years old, she took him on a trip to Egypt and to an extended visit to Europe. It was in Egypt that the young Smith began to study Arabic. Indeed, it marked a turning point in his life.

After obtaining his B.A. Honours in Oriental languages from the University of Toronto in 1939, he and his wife moved to Cambridge, England where he studied and was a research student. Then he went to India as a missionary and remained there for seven years. He taught Indian and Islamic History at the Forman Christian College in Lahore, India and studied the life of the Indian Muslim Community there. It was in India that he wrote

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<sup>3</sup>Charles J. Adams, "Islamic Religious Tradition", in Leonard Binder, ed., *The Study of the Middle East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), p. 40.

<sup>4</sup>H.A.R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p. 57.

his first book *Modern Islam in India: A social analysis*.

In 1946, he returned to North America and completed his PhD at Princeton University in 1948. Then, in 1949, he came to the McGill Faculty of Divinity where he continued to pursue his interest in Islam and seized the opportunity to found the McGill Institute of Islamic Studies in 1951. He spent there for fourteen years, 1949-1963. He then continued his academic career at the Harvard University between 1964 and 1973. In 1978, he returned to Harvard and retired in 1984. Harvard appointed him professor emeritus of the comparative study of religion on his retirement.

At the end of his career, he was appointed to a senior research post in the Faculty of Divinity at Trinity College, University of Toronto. It was in Toronto, his place of birth, that he died of natural causes at the age of 83 on Monday, February 7, 2000.

### C. His Works

It has been recognized that Smith, during his academic career, had published extensively on Islam, inter-religious understanding, history of religion and the teaching of religion. He wrote a dozen books, some pamphlets, and more specifically numerous articles on Islamic subjects, on religion generally, on education, west/east studies, and culture generally in some academic journals, local and international. There are also some articles, thesis and dissertations on his views.

His son, Arnold, said that his father's 10 books probably represented his greatest contribution and his *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which dealt with the beliefs held by the world's major religions and concluded that "religion is universal in human societies", was probably the most significant book of his father.<sup>5</sup>

In my opinion, the 10 books are:<sup>6</sup>

1. 1943. *Modern Islam in India*. Lahore: Minerva. Rev. ed., London: V. Gollancz, "1946" (sic 1947). Reissued: Lahore: Sh. M. Ashraf, 1963, 1969; New York: Russel & Russel, 1972; and pirated edition, Lahore: Ripon,

<sup>5</sup>*The Globe and Mail*, (Montreal, Thursday, February 10, 2000).

<sup>6</sup>Richard T. McCutcheon, comp, "Wilfred Cantwell Smith: A Chronological Bibliography". In Michel Despland and/et Gerard Vallee, eds. *Religion in History: The Word, the Idea, the Reality / La religion dans l'histoire: Le mot, l'idée, la realite*, (Ontario, Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion / Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, 1992), pp. 243 - 48.



- 1947 (with a spurious chapter "Towards Pakistan" by an unknown hand). New Edition: New Delhi: Usha, 1979.
2. 1957. *Islam in Modern History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Reissued: London: Oxford University Press, 1958; New York: New American Library (Mentor Books), 1959; London: New English Library (Mentor Books), 1965; Princeton and London: Princeton University Press (Princeton Paper back), 1977. Taped for Recording for the Blind, Inc., Washington, 1973. Translated into Arabic (pirated, 1960; authorized, 1975), Swedish (1961), French (1962), Indonesian (1962-1964), German (1963), and Japanese (1974). Portions translated into Urdu (1958-59, 1960) and Arabic (1960).
  3. 1962. *The Faith of Other Men*. Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Enlarged edition. New York: New American Library, 1963. Reissued: New York: New American Library (mentor Books), 1965; London: New English Library (Mentor Books), 1965; New York and London: Harper & Row (Torch book), 1972. Translated into Swedish (1965), Korean (1989). Pp. 105-28 in abridged form = Chapter 1 in *Religious Diversity*.
  4. 1963. *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*. New York: Macmillan. Reissued: New York: New American Library (Mentor Books), 1964; London: New English Library (Mentor Books), 1965; San Francisco: Harper & Row, and London: S.P.C.K., 1978; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990. Translated into Korean (1990).
  5. 1965. *Modernisation of a Traditional Society*. Bombay, Calcutta, etc., Asia Publishing House. Chapter I, reprinted in slightly abridged form in *Religious Diversity*.
  6. 1967. *Questions of Religious Truth*. New York: Charles Scribner's Son; and London: V. Gollancz, 1967. Translated into Japanese (1971). Pp. 39-62 in abridged form = Chapter 2 of *Religious Diversity*.
  7. 1977. *Belief and History*. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia.
  8. 1979. *Faith and Belief*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Reissued 1987.
  9. 1981. *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. Reissued; London: Macmillan and New York: Orbis Books, 1989 (sic 1990).
  10. 1981. *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies*. The Hague: Mouton.

### C. His Conception of Faith

The word 'truth' has been a crucial problem in the history of mankind along with the other good things such as beauty, moral character, and justice. The good things are the provinces more cardinal of faith as the Western classical tradition of rationality and all was a tradition engendered by, eliciting, and sustaining, faith.<sup>7</sup>

Faith in reason, in the course of specifically Western history, has been a significant form of the worldwide human potentiality for and fact of faith. Faith I have characterized as in general a human recognition of and response to The Transcendent. The Transcendent transcends.<sup>8</sup>

To Smith, faith is personal faith; it operates upon cumulative tradition and formulates itself in tradition's terms, as it is the dynamic relationship of man with God while faith's expression constitutes mankind's tradition. This is clearly mentioned in his statement saying that:

By 'faith' I mean personal faith...By 'cumulative tradition' I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance pattern, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on; anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe.<sup>9</sup>

As 'faith is a part a way of looking at the world',<sup>10</sup> it is natural that religious faith is different from each other. Again, faith is dynamic in the sense that the quality of someone's faith may change, decrease or increase from time to time as it is nourished and patterned by the tradition, is formed and in some sense sustained by it – yet faith precedes and transcends the tradition, and it turn sustains it.<sup>11</sup> In short, faith varies.

Some have faith that is large, rich, strong, serene, and that renders them

<sup>7</sup>W.C. Smith, "Religious Pluralism in its Relation to Theology and Philosophy – and of These Two to Each Other", in Robert C. Culley and William Klempa, eds. *The Three Loves: Philosophy, Theology, and World Religions: Essays in Honour of Joseph C. McLelland*, (Atlanta : Scholars Press, 1994), p. 179.

<sup>8</sup>W.C. Smith, *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (a Mentor Book), (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc. 1964), pp. 255-56.

<sup>10</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*. (New York and London: Harper & Row (Torchbook), 1972), p.76.

<sup>11</sup>W.C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 5.



generous, courageous, compassionate, patient, noble, and creative.<sup>12</sup> Faith in a comparative study of religion can be called an ability to see the divine in new and different way.<sup>13</sup>

#### D. The Faith of Others

The purpose of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in launching the importance of understanding faith of others, seems to hope the emergence of the new world which is waiting to be born, a world of cultural pluralism, of diverse faith.<sup>14</sup> In bringing to birth's tomorrow's world, two aspects will come up. One is that of recognizing the kind of world, the other is that of willing what kind of community.<sup>15</sup> Both of them should be related to the problems of comparative religion involving an appreciation of others' faith and a widening and deepening of one's own.

Smith tends to be optimistic that there will be a world of pluralism, of diverse faith. There will be no such kind of world and community, unless we must envisage other men of faith moving forward, not back. It is a creative task that is demanded of us, not a destructive one of sloughing off any part of each man's vision that other men do not share.<sup>16</sup>

The fact is that a fundamental challenge facing mankind today - whether mankind will rise to or not remains to be seen. Theoretically, it can be achieved, and is worth achieving; we are not discouraged by the possibility of failure, but rather excited by the possibility and need of success.<sup>17</sup>

Smith's optimism of appreciating other faiths may be traced in his attitude towards Islam to which he has spent writing on the religion. He, for example, has seen Islamic faith as "a divine-human complex" by which he explores both what faith means and what are its various constituting elements to Muslim. Indeed, as a student of Islam, he has written more than 30 articles on Islam covering its socio-historical analysis, teachings and some perceptions of its own followers. He believes that *Iman* (an inner relation to the transcendent), not ritual and dogmas, is the real essence of religion of Islam.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup>W.C. Smith, *Faith and Belief*, *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup>For a more detailed list of articles, see Richard T. McCutcheon, comp, *loc. cit.* See

To Smith, Islam is a religion; and like other religions, is transcendent, ineffable; no form can contain or exhaust it. Like other religions, however, it has been (partially) expressed in many forms – artistic, intellectual, mystic – and more than some others, social. In fact, Islam is characterized among the religions partly by the particular emphasis which it has from the beginning given to the social order.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, he is certainly convinced that a world brotherhood, which is more exciting, more significant, and more rewarding, will really come true in the future.

### E. His Conception of Religion

John Hick observes that Smith believes that:

A religion is an entity that can be traced historically and mapped geographically, is a human phenomenon. Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and so on are human creations whose history is a part of the wider history of human culture. He traces the development of the concept of a religion as a distinct and bounded historical phenomenon and shows that the notion, so far from being universal and self-evident, is a distinctively Western invention that has been exported to the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup>

To have a more complete elaboration on the meaning of religion, Smith also mentions four senses:

First, there is the sense of a personal piety. It is with this meaning that we are thinking today when we use such phrases as, "He is more religious than he was ten years ago", or we remark that in every community, Christian, Hindu, and the rest, there are some men whose religion is harsh and narrow, others whose religion is warm and open.

Secondly and thirdly, there is the usage that refers to an overt system, whether of beliefs, practices, values or whatever. Such a system has an extension in time, some relation to an area, and is related to a particular community; and is specific. In this sense, the word has a plural and in English the singular has an article. In each case, however, there are two contrasting meanings: one, of the system as an

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also Frank Whaling, ed., *The World's Religious Traditions Current Perspectives in Religious Studies: Essays in honour of Wilfred Cantwell Smith*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd., 1984), pp. 273-86.

<sup>19</sup>W.C. Smith, *Pakistan as an Islamic State*. (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf), 1951, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>John Hick, "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth", *op. cit.*, pp.40 - 41.



ideal, the other, of it as an empirical phenomenon, historical and sociological.

Finally, there is "religion" as a generic summation, "religion in general". Its meaning is inevitably derived in part, for anyone using it, from his sense of other three. Insofar as it is historical, it is as complex as all "the religions" taken together. Insofar as it is personal, it is as diverse as the men whose piety it synthesizes. The first sense discriminates religion in a man's life from indifference (or rebellion). The second and third (possibly intermingled) discriminates one religion from another. The fourth discriminates religion from other aspects of human life, such as art or economics.<sup>21</sup>

Here, it is possible for us to understand that a religion, to Smith, is a personal piety, that a religion refers to a system of beliefs, practices, values or whatever which can be related to geographical or social circumstances and that a religion is a religion in general. The fourth senses, unfortunately, create discrimination between religion and indifference, one religion from another, and between religion and other aspects of human life.

The quality of someone's faith is sometimes stable or unstable. It depends on his closeness to God. Someone's religiosity is also determined by his religious faith to God. Someone's present religiosity may be more religious than he was two years ago, two months ago, or even two weeks ago. It is probably caused by the fact that he is now much richer than he was. It is also possible that someone's poverty leads him into a more religious life.

Along with above description, in our society, we have witnessed conflicting truth-claims that are just that religions seem to say different and incompatible things about the nature of ultimate reality, the nature and destiny of man, and the modes of divine activity.<sup>22</sup>

To Smith, the problem of conflicting truth claims was a false one since the traditional truth claims rest in the familiar concept of 'a religion'.<sup>23</sup>

He then describes that the conflict of truth -claims may be apparent rather than real is to suggest one such potential solution, but within the bounds of an assessment of the issue along lines already mentioned without ignoring the fact that the great religious positions of mankind are each total *Weltanschauungen* conceptually or symbolically embracing everything<sup>24</sup>

As our social situation all over the world always changes from time to time, Smith argues that a religion must be modern, dynamic and applicable

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<sup>21</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>22</sup>John Hick, "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth", *op. cit.*, pp. 140-55.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>W. C. Smith, "Conflicting Truth-Claims: A Rejoinder", *op. cit.* p. 157.

to any situation, time and condition so that mankind can live in accordance with their cultural and spiritual needs.

He further says:

Religion must be not only modern, to fit a situation, which is different today from what, it was in the twelfth, or seventh century. Religion must be also dynamic, to fit a situation, which is different one minute from what, it will be the next. One can better say that religion today must apply not only to a situation at all, but to a process.<sup>25</sup>

Consequently, religious life of mankind should be seen as a dynamic continuum within which certain major disturbances have set up new fields of force, of greater or lesser extent, displaying complex relationship of attraction and repulsion, absorption, resistance, and reinforcement,<sup>26</sup> whereas religious statements at their best have been expressions of personal or corporate involvements, tentative but joyous, inadequate but exuberant, human but transcendence-oriented, to which we have to approach with sympathy by hearing them as echoes, not as claims, to see them as fingers pointing to the moon, not as the moon itself.<sup>27</sup>

#### F. His Conception of Truth

In philosophy, theology and world religions, the word 'truth' is undoubtedly very familiar to philosophers, theologians. This is not an exception for those who study a religion or religions as the religion adherents mainly the leaders tend to believe that the religion they embrace is true and often the truest, if compared with the others. What is believed to be true is often related to what they see and understand in what they find in reality, in experience, in statement and so forth.

To understand 'truth', there have emerged some theories of truth. Those are, among others: the correspondence theory, coherence theory, pragmatic theory and verifiability theory proposed by scholars. These theories will not be discussed in this paper.

Unlike the above theories, Smith, as a comparative religionist, wishes to advocate a human view of truth. He emphasizes the significance of human view in understanding truth without ignoring the objectivity of a state-

<sup>25</sup> W.C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, (New York: Russel & Russel, 1972), p. 100.

<sup>26</sup> John Hick, "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth", *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> W. C. Smith, "Conflicting Truth-Claims: A Rejoinder", *op. cit.*, p. 159.



ment, which in his view does not simply stand-alone.

In his article "A Human View of Truth" he states:

Briefly, my suggestion is that the locus of truth is persons. Or, if not 'the' locus, at least a central locus: of considerably greater importance and primacy than is nowadays usually recognized. Truth and falsity are often felt in modern times to be properties or functions of statements or propositions, my present proposal is that much is gained by seeing them rather—or at least by seeing them also, and primarily—as properties or functions of persons. It is not statements that are true or false but the use of them by individuals.<sup>28</sup>

He then maintains that: "To 'claim' to 'have' the 'truth' is the posture of those who act as if they had God in their pocket – a posture of lesser men not unknown, alas, in religious history but far from the best or most authentic representatives of any tradition."<sup>29</sup> So, we can understand that the person is the locus of truth. It is the person himself who has to modify and elaborate to make a religious concept applicable especially for the person employing it. In short, the person should renew the concept, statement, or symbol to make it true, significant and imperative for him.

It is clear, then, that the significance of personal context of an utterance, to Smith, lies on the fact that the major component of faith is 'significance' meaning that fundamental and all-pervasive characteristics of our conscious experience depends upon the personal attitude. Religious truth is a function of a personal life.<sup>30</sup>

### G. Conclusion

It is uneasy to cover what really Wilfred Cantwell Smith's conception of religious faith and truth is, but I at least have tried to figure, though in a very rough and simple description, his conception.

To me, his conception of the two important problems in the study of religion has been emphasized, and possibly focused on the significance of personal entity of mankind.

Faith is the fundamental religious category; even the fundamental

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<sup>28</sup>W.C. Smith, "A Human View of Truth," in *Studies in Religion*, Vol. I, No.1, 1971, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup>W.C. Smith, "Conflicting Truth-Claims: A Rejoinder, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>30</sup>J.L. Mehta, "The Hindu Tradition: The Vedic Root", in Frank Whaling, ed., *The World's Religious Traditions Current Perspectives in Religious Studies*, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-86.

human category. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level.

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. It determines someone's quality in being involved in social life in which there are various religions confessed and followed by others who are also trying to find truth, more specifically religious truth which is again understood differently by different men with their different personalities.

It is religion that mankind should understand it as it is concerned with life itself. Religious life, consequently, is also a kind of life. It is a relation – a living relation – between man and God. A man of faith is a man whose vision goes beyond his immediate environment, but whose life is lived within it.<sup>31</sup>

It also seems that Smith has given a kind of new perspective of Islam to Muslim and more specifically non-Muslims who are interested in exploring Islam in a dialogue nuance in the past, present and future.

Smith, finally, wishes that there will be a world of cultural pluralism, of diverse faith in which men can live with other men of different religious faith and truth, a world of brotherhood which is more exciting, more significant, and more rewarding.

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<sup>31</sup>W.C. Smith, *The Faith of Other Men*, loc. cit.



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