



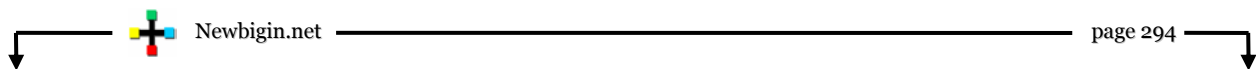
Review of "The Meaning and End of Religion", by Wilfred C. Smith

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J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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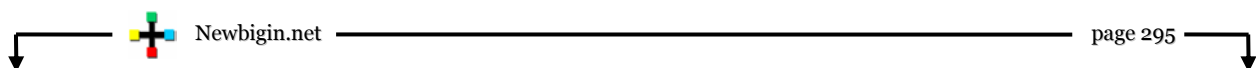
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This book, first published in 1962, is already something of a classic in its field and has greatly influenced the way in which the study of religion is carried out. It is surprising that we have been without a British edition for so long, and SPCK are to be thanked for putting this right.

It is a beautifully written book, clear, persuasive, drawing on very wide learning yet never weighed down with detail. Briefly, and very inadequately, the argument is as follows. Our modern western habit is to look at 'the religions' as separate complexes of belief, ritual, behaviour and organization, in respect of which we can argue about which is the 'true religion', and what they have in common, which is 'religion'. This is a late western reification of something which earlier ages saw differently. What we have to understand is not man's religions but his religiousness. We misunderstand, for example, St Augustine's *Vera Religio* if we translate it as 'The True Religion'; he was writing about 'True Piety' or 'Authentic Faith'. Calvin's magnum opus was not 'Institutes of the Christian Religion' (a translation first made in the 19th century) but 'Grounding in Christian Piety'. Islam is an apparent exception, but there were special reasons why the faith of Muhammad and his followers took the form it did.

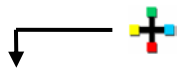
In short, the use of the words 'religion' and 'religions' is misleading and should be dropped. The realities with which we have to deal are



two: first, the faith which is a personal attitude shared by men and women in all ages and cultures and, second, the 'cumulative tradition' which shapes and is shaped by this individual faith. 'Faith' is the common human response to the transcendent. 'Religious statements express the faith of persons who as persons are involved in transcendence' (p. 183). This faith is the reality which we must seek to understand. It is primary; the rest of the phenomena of religion are secondary except in the sense that the 'cumulative tradition' which faith creates conditions the faith of those who come after. The transcendent is the same for everyone: the cumulative tradition is different.

One must see this book as part of an ongoing and often passionate debate about the methodology of 'Comparative Religion' as a field of study. When Max Muller wrote his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* in 1873, he called upon 'those who have devoted their lives to the study of the principal religions of the world to take possession of the new territory in the name of true science'. This 'scientific' approach was carefully distinguished from the 'dogmatic' approach of the theologian, who looked at the field from the standpoint of one religion supposed to be true. While there have always been those who questioned the former approach, the main thrust of Religionswissenschaft has been towards the 'objective' study of the forms of religion, using the tools of the historian, the anthropologist, the sociologist and the psychologist but without any commitment to belief in the realities with which the religions were occupied. Smith's book is part of a movement away from this towards an insistence that the student of the religions must go beyond their outward forms to 'a point where we can understand, not with complete assurance but with reasonable confidence, and not fully but in significant part, what the faith of other persons ... is and has been' (p. 188). It is essential to this approach that Smith accepts the reality of the 'transcendent' (however it be conceived) as the object of the 'faith' which is the proper subject of study for the student in this field. This would have been rejected by an earlier generation of scholars as the intrusion of theology into 'true science', but Smith has no difficulty in showing that it is the way scholars are going and must go.

And yet this immensely persuasive book leaves me asking some large questions. Let me suggest one. Is this a possible stopping place on the road from Max Muller's 'true science' towards a way of understanding which accepts the reality of faith and of the transcendent as the primary data? Will these two terms bear the weight that is here put on them? Strictly speaking they are purely formal; the 'transcendent' could be personal or impersonal, benevolent or malevolent, or even (according to John Hick, p. xv) non-existent. In fact because Smith is a Christian his use of the term is constantly filled with Christian content. If this were absent, the argument would lose much of its persuasiveness.



Smith makes effective use of Brunner's statement that 'the Christian faith is not one of the religions of the world'. Exactly so, says Smith, and '*neither is the faith of any other people*' (p. 139) (italics original). There are no 'religions'; there is only faith. But what exactly is going on here? It is obviously true that a Christian, a Muslim and a Hindu are all alike in this respect that none of them can say: 'My religion is one of the world's religions.' If Jesus is God incarnate, then Christianity is not just one of the world's religions. If Muhammad is God's final Messenger then Islam is not just one of the world's religions. Each of these is speaking from a particular stance which excludes the others. What is the stance from which Smith can say 'All are right'? It is, briefly, his faith that there is a 'transcendent' which is the same for everybody, and that 'faith' is the common human response to this transcendent. But both concepts are purely formal. The words 'true' and 'false' cannot be applied to any description of the transcendent. There can be no such thing as a misdirected faith. 'No one in the whole history of man has ever worshipped an idol. Men have worshipped God – or something – in the form of idols. That is what idols are for.' Consequently 'any attempt to conceptualize a religion is a contradiction in terms' (p. 141).

Is this a possible halting place for the science of religions? 'The end of religion is God' says Smith in his final summary (p. 201). But does the word 'God' denote a purely formal concept? If not, does this conclusion not point us beyond the place where the book leaves us? Has not the theological camel got its nose so far into the scientific tent that it is bound to make further inroads?

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