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Amen and Āmīn: Faith and Muslims

Response by Professor Amir Hussain

Grace and peace, *al-salaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatahu*, peace be upon you and the Mercy and Blessings of God. I am honoured, delighted and humbled to offer a brief response to the wonderful inaugural McGinley lecture from Fr. Patrick Ryan. Let me begin with the words that Wilfred Cantwell Smith delivered almost exactly sixty years ago today (Dec. 8, 1949) in **his** inaugural lecture at McGill University, entitled “The Comparative Study of Religion”: “There are two elements in the feeling, close to awe, with which I am touched in assuming the charge that has been entrusted to me here...”¹ For Professor Smith, those two elements were honour and gratitude, and like him, I am honoured and grateful to offer this response. A very simple and sincere “Thank you” to all of you who are reading these words. I need to single out Fr. Joseph McShane for his hospitality, Sr. Anne-Marie Kirmse for her help with the arrangements, Rabbi Polish for his response, and of course to Fr. Ryan for inviting me to respond to his lecture.

The simple and perhaps the most correct response would be for me to say amen and āmīn and then write no more. However, since this lecture is taking place in New York and I am from Los Angeles, that might raise doubts in your mind about the intellectual rigor and competence of Angelinos. So let me write a few more words that might remove those doubts, although in which direction, I am uncertain.

I knew Cardinal Dulles only through his writings, and so I am privileged to learn about his person from Fr. Ryan. Let me say a few words about Professor Smith before talking about comparative theology and concluding with some words on faith.

For six years, Professor and Mrs. Smith lived in Lahore, the city of my birth. And it is

important to mention both of them. Women hold up half of the sky, we are told, and the life lived by Wilfred was shared with Muriel. I had the privilege of working with Wilfred and Muriel in Toronto, after their retirement from Harvard. They learned about Muslims not simply through the study of texts, but from living with Muslims. And they did this over sixty years ago, decades before the current scholarly trend towards long-term participant observation. I am reminded of words that Edward Seidensticker (the first translator of the Nobel Prize winner Kawabata Yasunari) spoke about Kawabata at a lecture here in New York City on October 18, 1990: “He stands at the cutting edge of the traditional, or at the point where the traditional and the new and modern intersect, or at the head of the march pulling the traditional into the future.”²

It is the study of Muslims, not just Islam, which is important here. Let me return to Professor Smith’s inaugural lecture sixty years ago. He said:

Religion in any vital sense – or anyway, religion as the subject matter of our study – is not the rites, symbols, doctrines, etc., of the system; but what these mean to a man. What he does with them: and what they do to him. Religion lies somewhere in the interaction between men and their religious material...Furthermore, for those who will join me in discarding the essentialist view, to enter the continuing community is to accept the past tradition not as binding, but simply as past tradition. That tradition is open: the future is ours. The future of Christianity lies with Christians; the future of Islam with Muslims.³

One of Wilfred’s most important books was *Towards a World Theology* (1981). The subtitle of the book reflected Professor Smith’s life-long work, “Faith and the Comparative History of Religion.” In that book, he argued that our various religions traditions were best understood when taken together, or to use his words,

that their several histories, individually already complex, can be understood, and indeed can be understood better, and in the end can be understood only, in terms of each other: as strands in a still more complex whole. What they have in common is that the history of each has been what it has been in significant part because the history of the others has been what *it* has been. This truth is newly discovered; yet truth it is, truth it has throughout been. Things proceeded in this interrelated way for many centuries without humanity’s being aware of it; certainly not fully aware of it. A new, and itself interconnected, development is that currently humankind *is* becoming aware of it, in

various communities.⁴

That is exactly what Fr. Ryan is trying to do here, to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding. To show the deep connections in our religious history, Professor Smith began his book with the story of Leo Tolstoy, his *Confession* written in 1879 and published in 1884.

How many of you are familiar with Tolstoy and the story of his “conversion” from a worldly life to a life of ascetic service? The story that converted him was the story of Barlaam (the hermit) and Josaphat (the Indian prince). In the story, the Indian prince Josaphat is converted from a life of worldly power to the search for moral and spiritual truths by Barlaam, a Sinai desert monk. Tolstoy learned the story from the Russian Orthodox Church. However, it was not a Russian story, as the Russian Church got it from the Byzantine Church. But it was not a Byzantine story, either, as it came to the Byzantine Church from the Muslims. But the story did not originate with Muslims, as Muslims in Central Asia learned it from Manichees. And in the end, finally, it was not a Manichean story, as the Manichees got it from Buddhists. The tale of Barlaam and Josaphat is in fact a story of the Buddha. Bodhisattva becomes “Bodasaf” in Manichean versions, “Josaphat” in later tellings of the tale.

However, Wilfred’s genius was not in simply pointing to the history of this story, but to how it moved forward in time. Those who know Tolstoy know that he was an influence on a young Indian lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi, who founded Tolstoy Farm in Durban in 1910. And those that know Gandhi know that the story does not end with him. Gandhi was an influence on a young African-American minister, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The story shows that we are connected to each other, both forwards and backwards in time.

And it is important to note that the kind of dialogue in which we are engaging here is happening around the Muslim world, not just in North America. In 2007, based out of Jordan, a

number of Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals issued a call to Christian leaders with the publication of the document *A Common Word Between Us and You*.⁵ That document calls Christians and Muslims into dialogue based on the two great commandments in each tradition (found for example in Mark 12:28-32), love of God and love of one's neighbour. These, of course, both enter Christianity and Islam through the Jewish tradition. In 2008, Saudi Arabia sponsored conferences on dialogue for Muslims in Mecca, and for Muslims and non-Muslims together in Madrid. In January of 2009, I was one of a dozen Muslim scholars from the US and the UK who were invited to a conference at Al-Azhar University in Cairo on bridges of dialogue between the most important university in the Sunni Muslim world and the West. That conference also had Jewish and Christian participants.

There are a number of initiatives happening at Jesuit universities. In 1995, the 34th General Congregation recommended the creation in the General Curia of the Jesuits of a Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue. It also recommended the establishment in the Gregorian University in Rome of an institute for the study of religions and cultures, as well as making the Jesuit house in Jerusalem a centre for study and dialogue with Jews and Muslims. It was our friend, Fr. Thomas Michel, S.J., who directed that secretariat. This message of interfaith dialogue continued with the 35th General Congregation in 2008. In 2008, there was a conference on the Common Word document held in honour of Fr. Michel at Georgetown University, with a publication edited by John Borelli.

In the comparative study of religion, it is crucial, as Fr. Ryan reminded us in his lecture, that we have our categories correct. Wilfred wrote, for example, not only on connections between the Bible and Qur'ān, but more properly between Jesus Christ for Christians and the Qur'ān for Muslims. Or theology for Muslims and philosophy of religion for Christians, or the

Christian concept of the Spirit and Qur'anic notion of God as *al-Hādi*, or the guide. As Fr. Ryan has pointed out, faith is the appropriate category of comparison in all three traditions.

In describing faith in the Qur'ān, Professor Smith wrote:

Faith is something that people do more than it is something people have; although one may primarily say that it pertains to something that people are, or become. The Qur'ān presents, in reverberatingly engaging fashion, a dramatic challenge wherein God's terror and mercy, simultaneously, are proclaimed to humankind, whereby we are offered the option of accepting or rejecting His self-disclosure of the terms on which He, as Creator and Ruler of the world and of us, has set our lives.⁶

Later, he wrote:

The positive response, equally dynamic, is called 'faith', *īmān*. The *kāfir*, the ingrate, is he who says 'no' to God; and the *mu'min*, 'the man of faith', is he who accepts, who says 'yes'. As the theologians subsequently explain, *īmān*, faith, is self-commitment: it means, and is said to mean, almost precisely *s'engager*. I was very interested to discover Najm al-Dīn al-Taftāzāni, perhaps my favourite *mutakallim*, while writing in Arabic, resorting to the Persian word *giravīdan* to explain faith, just as modern existentialists writing in English resort to the French words *s'engager*, *engagement*. And the French word *gage* is exactly equivalent with the Persian word *girav*. Another interpretation that I have heard is that just as the word 'amen' in English, from this same root via Hebrew, or *āmīn* in Arabic, is used at the end of a congregational prayer or worship service as an act whereby the congregation participates, in its turn, in what the leader has done or said, accepting it then for themselves or incorporating themselves into his act, saying 'yes' to it, so the *mu'min*, the man of faith, the yes-sayer, the amen-sayer, is he who volunteers, who says "I, too".⁷

Let me bring my words to a close with another writer who spent formative years in India, Salman Rushdie, who in 1982 published his magisterial essay about colonial and post-colonial literature, *Imaginary Homelands*. Rushdie ended that essay with a reference to a book that Saul Bellow published that same year, *The Dean's December*:

There's a beautiful image in Saul Bellow's latest novel, *The Dean's December*. The central character, the Dean, Corde, hears a dog barking wildly somewhere. He imagines that the barking is the dog's protest against the limit of dog experience. 'For God's sake,' the dog is saying, 'open the universe a little more!' And because Bellow is, of course, not really talking about dogs, or not only about dogs, I have the feeling that the dog's rage, and its desire, is also mine, ours, everyone's. 'For God's sake, open the universe a little more!'⁸

This is my hope that through Fr. Ryan's tenure as the McGinley Professor in Religion and Society at Fordham University that we open the universe a little more. Thank you.

NOTES

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Comparative Study of Religion," in *Inaugural Lectures: McGill University Faculty of Divinity* (Montreal: McGill University, 1950), 41.

² Edward Seidensticker, *Kawabata and Snow Country: The Limited Editions Club Lecture Series: Number One* (New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1990), 5.

³ Smith, "The Comparative Study of Religion", 51 and 55.

⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 6.

⁵ Available on the web at <<http://acommonword.com>>.

⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *On Understanding Islam: Selected Studies* (Mouton: The Hague, 1981), 122.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 21.