
Wilfred Cantwell Smith: Love, Science, and the Study of Religion

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Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the influential scholar of Islam and reformer of the modern comparative study of religion, provoked controversy in arguing that one cannot understand a religion without studying persons, or persons without studying their faith. Scholarship has largely neglected his further claim that faith cannot be adequately known except in the context of friendship, understood as a mode of love. Here, I explain Smith's notion of love as constitutive of rationality and discuss how it emerges out of his critique of the norms of objectivity and impersonality long thought to be characteristic of the natural sciences. I conclude by suggesting the relevance of Smith's notion of love to the contemporary study of religion.

Persons cannot know persons except in mutuality; in respect, trust, and equality, if not ultimately love. In this realm of knowing, accordingly, the attitude with which one approaches one's data proves to be at least as significant, as consequential, as the methods with which one handles them. One must be ready not only to receive the other, but to give oneself.

—Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1997c: 143)

In arguing, as he did in 1959, that “the study of a religion is the study of persons,” Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the distinguished Canadian historian of religion and scholar of Islam, was not making a passing observation

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or stating an unexceptionable commonplace (1959: 34).¹ Rather, he was making a contestable—and controversial—claim about what the study of a religion and, indeed, all religions ought to be in the future.² Looking back to the past, Smith observes that the western study of religion from the nineteenth century onwards was marked by an attempt to catalogue and interpret the data that had been amassed in the years during and since the early modern period. He suggests that the process of interpreting what he terms the “externals of other people’s religions,” namely, their “gods, their doctrines, their institutions, and the like,” is still necessary (1959: 37, 35). For Smith, however, “the exciting new frontiers of inquiry and of challenge lie at a new and higher level,” that of the study of “other peoples themselves” (1959: 32).

Smith observes that “The large scale compilation of data of the nineteenth century and up to World War I has in the twentieth century and particularly since World War II been supplemented by a living encounter—a large scale face-to-face meeting between persons of diverse faiths” (1959: 32). He suggests that the encounter between persons of diverse faiths is not only a feature of modernity, but also a sign of one’s active involvement in life: “No longer are people of other persuasions peripheral or distant. . . . The more alert we are, and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they are our neighbors. . . . Confucians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street” (1963a: 11).

Smith was committed to the view that the study of religion ought to take account of this new reality. For religions, to his mind, “do not exist in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished, and static; they exist in men’s hearts” (1950: 51).³ In order to “know” a religion, students must seek out its adherents, and attend to the faith that is thought to lie in their hearts.

[i]t has long been recognized that a faith cannot be adequately expressed in words, not even by a man who holds it devoutly. To understand what is in his heart, therefore, the student must not merely listen to or read what a believer affirms, but must come to know those qualities of the

¹This essay is regarded as being of seminal importance for the field of comparative religion. For a critical response to it, see Kværne (1973). For Smith’s defense and explanation of this essay, see Smith (1973). On the importance of “Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why,” see, among others, Young (1992: 114–115), Bae (2003: 186, and 217, n37) and Bennett (1998: 3–5).

²This point was so important to Smith that it was the basis of what he referred to, throughout his career, as his “theme song.” See Smith (1992: 13). For a sharper version of this claim, see Smith (1990: 272): “The Study of Religion . . . distorts if it is not a study of persons and the personal.” For an early version of the same point, see Smith (1950: 53): “For basically the student [of religion] has to deal not with religions but with religious persons.”

³As quoted in Smith (1959: 34).

believer's life that can become known only in that personal two-way relationship known as friendship. This is peculiarly true of religious faith, but applies in some measure to all human discourse. It is to misunderstand man not to recognize that the knowledge of a person available to another person depends quite basically on the personal relationship between them. I cannot know my neighbor more than superficially unless I love him. (1959: 39, n18)

One cannot understand a religion without studying persons, or persons without studying their faith, or faith without "that personal two-way relationship known as friendship." The specialized knowledge conferred through friendship is explicitly represented as a product of love; in the absence of love, persons may only be known superficially. If religion is the study of persons, and if persons cannot be known unless we love them, it follows that love (as generated in friendship) is the condition of understanding with respect to other people and their religions. Both are to be approached with a view toward the "general principle that that an outsider cannot understand a civilization or a great religion unless he approaches it with humility and love" (1959: 50, n39). Upon love rests the possibility of knowledge of personal faith; upon the knowledge of that faith, as a supplement to the knowledge of "externals," the study of religion depends. Smith takes what is true of the study of religion "to be true finally of all work in the humanities" (1959: 34–35).

In Smith's view, the stakes in recognizing that the study of religion is the study of persons are extremely high. "The student of comparative religion," he observes, "begins with the postulate that it is possible to understand a religion other than one's own. In our day, this postulate is being tested—urgently, severely, by our concrete human situation. . . . To meet this challenge demands that we rethink our purposes, recast our basic concepts" (1959: 56). The reward, he argues, will be commensurate with the demand: "If we do meet it, the results will contribute to that largest of contemporary problems, the turning of our nascent world society into a world community" (1959: 56).⁴

⁴David Hollinger usefully situates Smith in the context of a group of twentieth-century ecumenical Protestants. In that context, he remarks that "the ecumenists were more institution builders than revivalists, more devoted to creating and maintaining communities than to facilitating a close emotional relationship with the divine, and more frankly concerned with social welfare than with the state of the individual soul" (2011: 22). The unimportance of evangelical revivalism to his project notwithstanding, these oppositions do not neatly apply to Smith's thought. His notion of rational-personalist love bridges the boundary between community building and close relationship with the divine, as well as the boundary between concern for social welfare and for the spiritual lives of individuals. On the conditions under which justice and love coincide, see Smith (1997d: 40–41). To his mind, the pursuit of "love and community" (1997d: 41) is not to be divorced from the intellectual

One of the more puzzling questions raised by Smith's account of a trajectory running from the study of religion to the construction of a world community pertains to the role that love plays in this process. More broadly, how important is love to Smith's overall project? Here, I argue that the question of love is, in fact, at the heart of Smith's thought, and suggest why it matters for the contemporary study of religion. In the context of his oeuvre as a whole, love comes to sight as a key feature, a problem, and an unresolved question, rather than an unconflicted and fully articulated concept, ready for use and adaptation by other scholars. Generally speaking, Smith treats love in a conventional manner as a force which tends toward cohesion. Less conventional, however, is his interest in love as it is generated in the context of inquiry into other religions. He is particularly interested in friendship, understood as a vehicle for preferential love (of varying degrees of intensity) between equals, and, within the category of friendship, in the subcategory of interreligious friendships between intellectuals. As we shall discuss, in Smith's thought, and in his own experience, interreligious friendship can serve as the base for the construction of a community in which a difference is articulated and engaged (Smith 1963a: 9), rather than dissolved in the name of unity. More generally, Smith treats love as "constitutive of rationality" (1992: 18), which explains why it is exercised in the process of study, and especially "the study of persons." In his account, "the locus of truth is persons" (1997b: 99).⁵ Since persons, according to Smith, ultimately cannot be known in the absence of love, love becomes a key feature of the "rational articulation of truth" to which aim Smith was, he notes, "utterly committed" (1981: 88).

For the purpose of suggesting the intellectual historical setting out of which Smith's approach emerged, I begin by giving a brief, selective account of the prominence of questions about love in post-World War II western thought about religion. I then discuss some of the existing scholarship on Smith's work, before moving on to consider his rationalist-personalist account of love. I explore his attempt to reconceive of Western science (broadly construed to include humanistic inquiry) in light of his understanding of the human person as an object of knowledge and love. From there, I turn to an analysis of Smith's work with a view toward considering the relevance of his provocative vision to the contemporary study of religion.

project of reforming the study of religion. Indeed, institutional reform with respect to the study of religion depends upon attention to the faith in individual "hearts" (Smith 1950: 51).

⁵Smith qualifies this remark in adding, "Or if not 'the' locus at least a central locus: of considerably greater importance and primacy than is now usually recognized" (Smith 1997b: 99).

THE PROMISE OF WORLD COMMUNITY AND THE QUESTION OF LOVE

Writing in 1937, Indian scholar of comparative religion and philosophy Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observed that “while modern sciences and the extraordinary progress of communications have made the world into a closely knit whole, and produced a unity in external and superficial things, the mental, moral, and emotional hostilities are effectively preventing the development of a world consciousness and community. . . . We have to-day a world of increasing material contact and spiritual disunion” (1937: 259–260). In this, Radhakrishnan anticipates the commonly made claim that, as American scholar of international law and international relations Quincy Wright noted in 1948, people from around the world had been brought into close contact as a result of technological and “material contacts and interdependences” but without the “social awareness and common standards” that would make it possible for them to interact in peace (1948: 43).⁶ A world of closeness could no longer tolerate what might be called “closedness”; people who had been brought together by technology, it was argued, would have to learn to open their minds and, just as importantly, their hearts to one another in the process of moving toward a world community (Toynbee 1956: 216).

American Historian Lewis Mumford was correct, but only partially so, in observing, as he did in 1951, that “everyone realizes, at least in words, that only through a vast increase of effective love can the mischievous hostilities that now undermine our civilization be overcome” (1951: 284). To be sure, there was a great deal of talk about love at the time, but a wide range of opinions existed as to what “effective love” might consist of, how it might be generated, and what were the limits of its effectiveness.

In the mid-twentieth century, an increasing number of thinkers claimed that religious difference, long viewed as a source of enmity between peoples and nations, could be reconfigured as a source of global amity. World War II and the development of the atomic bomb lent special urgency to efforts to understand religious difference as an opportunity for mutual engagement. Such efforts frequently entailed the articulation of common norms. For example, an attempt was made to identify “brotherly” love as an “accepted major principle” (Jung 1945: 386) that was common to all religions but for some reason not commonly employed in practice.⁷ The question was how religions were to be reconfigured to support the norm of love that was thought to be intrinsic to all

⁶On this, see also Randall (1930: 21).

⁷See also Swabey (1958: 1029) and Cranston (1949: 175).

of them. In the postwar period, the two keys to the reconfiguration of religion came to be identified as interfaith communication and critical reflection, preeminently of the historical variety. Both German philosopher Karl Jaspers and British historian Arnold Toynbee saw history as a vehicle through which the relationship of the world's religions to one another could be reconfigured with a view toward providing "some new answer to the question of how love is possible" (Hocking 1934: 137) in this context. Both sought to supplement norms of tolerance, in light of their respective visions of community, and the sense that "toleration does not become perfect until it has been transfigured into love" (Toynbee 1956: 251).⁸

Smith's turn to love as a normative and conceptual resource is properly read within the context of the extended postwar conversation about history, science, and world community among historians, theologians, philosophers, and scholars of comparative religion. In this context, several distinctive features of his project emerge. First, Smith is explicitly interested in love that is generated in the course of scholarly conversation and aimed at mutual understanding. In his view, mutual understanding includes respect but also goes beyond it. As Willard Oxtoby points out, for Smith, mutual understanding has a moral as well as an intellectual dimension (Oxtoby 1976: 117). Toynbee, like Smith, connects the intellectual task of the historian to the furtherance of moral aims. Furthermore, he posits an affective underpinning to the moral project of countering ignorance and egotism, focusing on love as a means of attaining harmony with the "main current of the universe" (1956: 105) and providing aid for the suffering. But the notion of loving colloquy between equals does not play a central role in his project, as it does for both Jaspers and Smith.

As Jürgen Habermas points out, Jaspers views communication as a vehicle for the construction of community based on intellectual exchange: "Jaspers bases his central concept of existential communication on the model of the friendly polemics between great philosophers" (2001: 32). The scope of truth, in his account, extends beyond science (Jaspers 1959: 3). This more expansive mode of truth is sought for in the "loving contest [*liebender Kampf*]" (Jaspers 1951: 26) of communication with others or not at all. Yet, Jaspers's model of communication is as much about struggle or battle as it is about loving, while Smith's model of colloquy is relatively "pacific" (Hughes 1986: 204) in nature. His version of friendly love aims at the universalizability that is, in his view, characteristic of

⁸On love and historicity, see Jaspers (1949: 242).

rationality, while maintaining the attention to particulars characteristic of preferential love.

THE AMBIGUOUS EPISTEMOLOGY AND ETHICS OF LOVE

While it has been acknowledged that “the category of friendship has the highest epistemological status in Smith’s work” (Grünschloss 1994: 33),⁹ little scholarly attention has been paid to the concept of friendly love as it informs—or, in Smith’s view, *ought* to inform—the study of religion.¹⁰ In fact, despite the highly influential nature of Smith’s views on the study of religion, many of the specific details of his program for the overhaul of the study of religion, the reconstitution of religious experience, and the enhancement of the human condition have been little commented on, much less heeded.¹¹ In surveying the modest amount of scholarship on Smith, one finds that his claims concerning the role of love as it pertains to the study of the humanities and the state of the modern university have been variously criticized, regarded as quaint oddities, or simply neglected, even by scholars who are sympathetic to the overall aims of Smith’s project. For instance, Kenneth Cracknell describes Smith as a “speaker of some necessary and prophetic healing words to a divided and confused world” (2001: 2), and as one who is possessed of a “passionate concern” (2001: 18) for the role that universities should play in that world. Yet Cracknell does not identify love as one of the “great humanist ideals” (2001: 1) that the university is supposed to model and uphold in the course of furthering the rational pursuit of truth. He cites “truth and justice” (2001: 1) in this respect. The omission of love in this context is striking, given that, first, nowhere does Smith propose the idea of justice as constitutive of rationality, and secondly, that, as we shall discuss, Smith views universities as the loci of the ideal of *philosophia*, which he uses to refer to “that animating and commanding love of wisdom of which, historically, specific philosophic

⁹My translation. See also Grünschloss (1994: 33, n18 and 135).

¹⁰In recently identifying “community” as one of the central terms in Smith’s thought, Donald Swearer suggests a promising new direction in the study of Smith’s work. See Swearer (2011: 23).

¹¹As Jonathan Z. Smith has reminded us, Smith’s work is still usefully viewed in the context of a contestation with the views of Mircea Eliade (J. Z. Smith 2010: 1142, n1). It is striking to note that a search for “Mircea Eliade” as a subject turns up 130 items in a university library catalogue, while a search for “Wilfred Cantwell Smith” turns up eighteen items. Only four books (all of them revised doctoral dissertations, two in English, one in German, and one in Dutch) have been written exclusively about Smith’s work, with the most recent having been published in 1998 and 2003. See Hughes (1986), Grünschloss (1994), Stekelenburg (1998), and Bae (2003: 9, n7), who speculate that Eliade is better known than Smith “because his work appeals to the religious imagination of the public.” On Smith and Eliade, see Swearer (2011: 22) and Isenberg (1987: 617).

systems or patterns of ideas have been the crystallized expression” (1997d: 35).

Sheldon Isenberg notes that Smith creates a “model for achieving significant contributions to a worldwide unification through an ever widening circle of communication” (1987: 619). He observes that the central points from which circles of communication radiate outward are conversations between intellectuals, remarking that Smith focuses not on

the interaction of officials of the institutional forms of the various traditions nor the interactions of ordinary believers from the various communities but [on] the colloquy of intellectuals from the traditions who have been trained to use the tools of modern critical thought and can somehow effect the kinds of transformations among themselves and within their communities that can change the course of human history. (1987: 617)

Isenberg raises the question of whether this view is suggestive of “academic delusions of grandeur” rather than an urgent practical imperative.¹²

One criticism that has been directed toward Smith’s claim that “to know is to love and that true knowing requires loving” (1981: 123) is that love blinds and conceals as much as it illuminates and discloses.¹³ Another concern, as expressed by Per Kværne, is that Smith privileges friendship at the expense of systematic study. If we follow Smith’s proposals, Kværne suggests, “we find ourselves in the bizarre situation that ‘personal . . . friendship’—the value of which no one would contest but which is difficult enough to achieve even in our relations with those closest to us—takes precedence over the systematic observation of religious practices and the critical study of objective statements of belief” (1973: 164). But in his initial recommendation of friendship as a supplement to systematic study, Smith takes pains to point out that he is not suggesting “that a personalist epistemology is infallible,” and acknowledges that “it is possible to be inadequately informed, and even misinformed” (1959: 40, n18) in the context of friendship. In order to guard

¹²Like Isenberg, Terrence Merrigan notes the intellectualist cast of Smith’s project, pointing out that his version of “transcultural consciousness” is shared only by “*intelligent men and women*” (Smith 1981: 102, as quoted in Merrigan 1997: 689), with Merrigan’s emphasis, and that this consciousness connotes world citizenship. On Smith and intellectuals, see also Heim (1995: 60).

¹³With respect to Smith’s argument that “in order to know or understand one another ‘respect, trust, and equality, if not ultimately love’ are necessary,” William Wainwright, for instance, complained some years ago that “this isn’t clear. Hatred can sharpen our eyes and love can blind us. Smith appears to assume that I cannot see the world through another person’s eyes unless I love or respect him. But there is no argument for this, and it is not obvious” (1984: 363).

against either possibility, he recommends that “personal explanations must be checked against or even co-ordinated with texts and other overt data” (Smith 1959: 40, n18). Nonetheless, Smith claims, while “the personalist approach *does not replace* other methods . . . in our present world it cannot fail to supplement” (1959: 40, n18; my emphasis). Kværne assumes the primacy of the very norms of study that Smith wishes to contest, and treats his qualification of the argument for friendship as a contradiction of it. He does not engage Smith’s claim that the “systematic” and “objective” study of religion is defective, not because it is *too* scientific, but because it is not scientific enough.

The neglect and occasional misunderstanding of Smith’s notions of love, friendship, and community is especially striking, given that Smith himself calls attention to the role of community in his thought as being of constitutive importance, both with respect to his early work and throughout his career. Yet for all that it is striking, it is not surprising. Late in his life, as Smith reflected on his earlier, seminal work, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963b), he sought to address the accusation by critics that, in distinguishing personal faith from cumulative tradition, he underestimated “the central foundational importance of community, especially in religious life” (1992: 13).

Smith observes that, over the course of his career, he had come to see that he had indeed “underplayed the importance in human life . . . of our participating in community: the community-ness of being human” (1992: 18). In looking back, Smith roots this tendency in his own experience, candidly admitting that “the community of which I fundamentally felt a part is not the Church or another formalized grouping; rather, it is undefined. In principle it is humankind as a whole, an ideal that has powerfully shaped my feeling and thinking and writing. In practice it is liberal intellectuals throughout the world—to whatever institutionalized group they may ostensibly belong” (1992: 18). It is not, then, that Smith lacked a sense of community, or that such a sense did not play a decisive role in his thinking, but rather that the sense of community which “powerfully shaped” his work was, in principle, that pertaining to humankind as a whole, and, in practice, the community of people who were, like him, liberal intellectuals.

Smith suggests that his hesitation about excessive identification with his religious community was rooted in his experience as a missionary and teacher in Lahore in the 1940s and the subsequent Partition of India, “when a million people were massacred and ten million uprooted in inter-communal conflict” (1992: 18). Indeed, Smith’s formative experience in Lahore prompted him to develop his ideas on the knowledge-conferring and -confirming properties of intellectual friendship, as

well as the risks of community life that is not tempered by norms of critical inquiry. Upon arriving in Lahore in 1940, Smith began teaching Islamic history; as Sheila McDonough notes, “he also took part regularly in discussions with a group of young Indian intellectuals—Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Christian—who shared his hopes [for a future free of colonial exploitation]. . . . Many of these people remained his lifelong friends” (2001: 58).¹⁴ Smith’s in-depth experience of interreligious friendship in Lahore did not only yield him new friends. Years later, he suggested that it also left him with an immediate, personal awareness of the extent to which people from other faiths were fully “participa[nts] in the grace of God and his bounty” (1988: 372). The experience, via friendship, of this phenomenon came first; the theory as to the status of the knowledge conferred by friendship, and its relationship to such knowledge as might be acquired through the study of data, came later.

By his own account, the experience of witnessing the terrible violence and suffering that marked the partition of India left Smith with an acutely felt awareness of a community ravaged by inter-communal conflict, while apparently lacking the resources for collective critical judgment by which he thought that conflict might be moderated. In Cracknell’s words, “Smith never [forgot] the anguish he felt standing among the ruins of Lahore. . . . Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs, who he knew as working so harmoniously together, had turned upon each other. . . . Smith realized then that he had found his life-long calling,” which was “to help men and women understand that religion should never again be used as an excuse for such bloodshed and destruction” (2001: 6). Cracknell, along with Gordon Pruet, has aptly suggested that the experience of the partition caused Smith to reevaluate his political perspective and methodological approach (Cracknell 2001: 6; Pruet 1990: 397). Just as importantly, I would add, it prompted a new train of thought on the promise and perils of contrasting modes of community—the first ostensibly marked by critical thinking and an openness to appreciating the dignity and faith of religious others, and the second marked by vulnerability to deadly rivalry on religious grounds. The question was how to foster the first mode of community and ward off the disastrous effects of the second.

Community, in Smith’s evolving unsentimental view, was not an inherent good in and of itself, or inevitably a counter to conflict. It could, in fact, to his mind, easily serve as a breeding ground for hatred, violence,

¹⁴On Smith’s experience of community in Lahore, see also Cracknell (2001: 5) and Grünshloss (1994: 150).

and conformism. He does not, however, seem to have felt that commitment to the community of humankind as a whole, or to that of liberal intellectuals, entailed comparable risks of fostering division or promoting uncritical conformism. According to his own retrospective account of his work, Smith's selective concerns about the pathologies of community hardly reflected a lack of interest in it:

Despite this distrust of devoted or blind loyalty to one's mundane circumscribed group, I take community among persons very seriously indeed—religiously, one might say; more seriously, I should think, than do many intellectuals. This comes out, for instance, in my incorporating community among persons as a central factor in a theory of language; my including friendship as an integral element in epistemology (surely that is rare); love as constitutive of rationality; mutual understanding and 'corporate self-consciousness' (*not* 'inter-subjectivity'), as an avenue out of the subjective-objective polarity. I see modern secular individualism as pitiable and forlorn. Thus it was gravely awry if my writing gave an impression of embracing it. (1992: 18)¹⁵

Smith's experience in Lahore had given him an eyewitness view of the human suffering caused when conflicting "devoted or blind" loyalties gave rise to inter-communal conflict. Yet, he did not, for all that, wish to dismiss loyalty altogether as a norm for communal life, as evidenced, for instance, by his suggestion that a prospective world community should be characterized by loyalty as well as understanding (1963a: 9). How then to arrive at a version of loyalty that was devoted, but not excessively so, and far-seeing, rather than blind?

Smith's model of community required critical rationality in order to counter the dangers of uncritical conformism. But rationality uninterested in particularity and human dignity—a rationality not grounded in or encompassing of love—would represent, in Smith's account, a surrender to what he saw as the pathologies of scientism, on the one hand, and an ineffectual counter to communal anger, hatred, and misunderstanding, on the other hand. Accordingly, Smith sought to devise a remedy that attended to the various pathologies of the academy, as he saw them, as well as the pathologies of global religious and political experience. He did not wish merely to invert the scientific preference for norms related to objectivity (such as impartiality and neutrality) over those of

¹⁵Grünschloss (1994) argues that Smith harbors a bias towards modern individualism that distorts his understanding of Islam, in particular.

subjectivity. Inter-subjectivity was insufficient in this context because it did not transcend the ideal of objectivity. It merely abstracted from it.

What was required, in Smith's view, was an intellectually defensible model of knowing and knowledge that attended to persons with respect for their dignity and inner lives, without sacrificing the universal scope and commitment to truth via external verification characteristic of the sciences. In attempting to counteract the widely held notion that, as famed physiologist Claude Bernard once put it, "Art is I, [and] Science is We" (1865: 75),¹⁶ Smith sought find a way to make the humanities, starting with his own field of the comparative study of religion, "We." Yet he wished to do so not by neutralizing the personal dimensions of scholarly inquiry, as in the natural sciences, but by heightening them. Smith calls his third position "corporate critical self-consciousness" (1981: 59), by which he meant "knowledge that is in principle apt both for the subject himself or herself, and for all external observers; or, in the case of group activities, for both outside observers and participants. This does mean in principle all humankind" (1981: 59). Thus, his attempt to address the subjective/objective imbalance within the academy, at least in theory, would have ramifications beyond it.

LOVE, RATIONAL PERSONALISM, AND THE RISKS OF COMMUNITY

As a self-pronounced "old-fashioned rationalist" (1997c: 139), Smith aimed not to undermine rationality or to explore the tension between rival versions of it, but rather to shore it up on the basis of a new foundation.¹⁷

One effect of understanding "love as constitutive of rationality" is that the latter takes on the cohesive and integrative properties of the former

¹⁶I owe this reference to [Shapin \(2010: 9\)](#).

¹⁷While the fact that Smith espoused (in an informal and idiosyncratic way) both personalism and rationalism has been noted, it has not been linked to his notion of love, despite Smith's own claim that he sought to posit love as constitutive of rationality. This has led to questions about the extent to which Smith's rationalism is really rationalism at all. Kuk-Won Bae, commenting on the perceived conflict between Smith's putative rationalism and his status as an "advocate of personalism" ([Bae 2003: 27](#)), suggests that Smith is probably not best understood as a rationalist. He concludes that "the real significance of [Smith's] commitment to the rational principle is probably not what it is explicitly for, i.e., rationalism, but what it is implicitly against, i.e., anti-rationalism" ([Bae 2003: 28](#)). This, I think, neglects the strenuousness with which Smith undertakes what he calls the "rescue of rationality" ([Smith 1981: 78](#)) in the face of the various threats posed to it by scientism and subjectivism, as well as the extent to which his vision of rationalism recognizably evokes and reinvents aspects of the ancient Greek tradition, and the thoroughness with which he links his version of rationalism to his notions of faith, community, and love.

and serves as the connecting principle between individual and communal integrity. In Smith's account of the Western intellectual tradition stemming from Greece, he suggests that rationality "serves as our integrating principle. This is so socially (rationality is the link among persons in society, and the principle of social order), and individually (to behave rationally is moral)" (1997d: 40).

To Smith's mind, the rationalist Greek tradition is best understood with reference to the form of love that he refers to as *philosophia* rather than "philosophy;" it is the former that designates the "animating and commanding love of wisdom" (1997d: 35). In considering what this love has meant to people whose lives have been shaped by it, Smith suggests that the tradition associated with *philosophia* might be understood as a religious tradition. In doing so, he is at pains to point out, he does *not* mean to suggest that "Greek *philosophia* is 'a religion.' For me," he reminds his readers, "there are no 'religions.' For religion is a function of persons, not of things. These latter constitute traditions which are the evidence of, and the occasion for, the ordering of human lives in terms of inner and outer wholeness" (1997d: 48).

The locus of this most comprehensive and universal mode of the right ordering of human lives in terms of wholeness is not a temple, mosque, church, or synagogue, or such institutions taken collectively, but rather, the university, understood as "the central focus of the Greek legacy in our culture" (1997d: 49). It is here that the split between the human and the religious is revealed to be an illusion. For Smith, "these are not two categories, with human nature fundamentally secular and religion as some contingent additive, to be explained, even rationally explained; but rather one category in many forms—so that our rationalist heritage may enable us to understand our common humanity in its multiformity" (1997d: 49).

Common humanity, in Smith's terms, is neither secular nor religious; the notion of *homo religiosus* is just as problematic as that of *homo secularis*. The human subject is neither religious nor secular; rather he or she is wise or unwise. In Smith's account, it is not love or faith as such, but rather *rationalist* love and faith that serve as the source of cosmic coherence and convergence. At the same time, Smith's program does not suggest uncritical nostalgia for or a full-blown recovery of classical rationalism.¹⁸

Smith did indeed, however, seek to recover the classical rationalist notion of the coincidence of knowledge and virtue, as well as more

¹⁸One might contrast Smith's version of rationalism with Socratic rationalism. As Kateb (1998: 77–112) points out, the latter sees doubleness and irony as the condition of integrity. The former aims for wholeness and transparency.

expansive scope of the early Greek understanding of science (1950: 56) in the process of arguing for a reconstitution of rationality on new grounds. Specifically, he aims to blend rationalism with personalism by grounding the former in love, and, by that intellectual feat, to rescue the rational pursuit of truth from the reductive tendencies of modern scientific rationality. He strives as well to save love from the risks of uncritical, blind loyalty and parochialism by putting it in the service of universal ends, and subjecting it to the demands of rationality. The goal is what he calls “rational personalism in community,” understood as an alternative to both “false” objectivity and “inadequate” subjectivity (1997c: 145).

In the process of developing his personalist¹⁹ and “existentialist approach to religion” (1950: 59), Smith sought to correct what he saw as three errors: first, the belief that religious traditions are defined by unchanging essences; secondly, the belief that they were defined primarily by subjective experience and feelings; and thirdly, the belief that the model of knowing characteristic of the natural sciences is *the* preeminent model of knowing as such, with alternative modes of knowing being understood as irrelevant survivals of defective proto-science.

While anti-rationalism is to be avoided, so too is scientific rationalism to be checked in its tendency to subsume all objects of knowledge, including human beings in their capacity as persons, under the same laws. Left unchecked, and extended to human beings, modern-day scientific rationalism points, in Smith’s view, toward an ersatz universalism that is actually a narrow scientism, one which threatens to undermine the defense of “actuality and . . . the unique,” and with them “human dignity” (1981: 5). The hegemony of the model of knowing peculiar to natural science has resulted, Smith suggests, in a worldview according to which the “the model for what it is to know, for what constitutes truth, for what is really real, eventually even for what is significant, even for what sentences mean, has been taken from a natural science that looked impersonally at impersonal data” (1979b: 150).

In Smith’s opinion, the modern attempt to import norms of “objective” scientific inquiry into the humanities poses a dangerous threat to the latter because of its neglect of those features of human experience that transcend matter in some sense, while still retaining actuality. Among such features are the concepts of personhood and personal identity. For Smith, personhood is the locus of the concrete, the diverse, and the actual, as well as the transcendent. “Person,” he suggests, is a transcendent

¹⁹For the statement that “I’m personalist,” and rejection of the idea that personalism is synonymous with subjectivism, see Smith (1975: 101). On Smith’s vigorously criticized personalism, see Bae (2003: 188–189).

concept rather than an empirical one; to fail to consider human beings in light of their capacity for self-transcendence is, to his mind, a moral as well as an intellectual error—one which has implications for practice as well as theory: “To find a drunkard in the gutter and to see and treat him as nothing more than a drunkard in the gutter is to err, not only morally but intellectually” (1979b: 148). The drunkard in the gutter is, in fact, a drunkard in the gutter. Smith suggests that he is something more than what he appears to be within the purview of fact.

How then to move from a model of study involving a superior knower and a supine or otherwise inferior “it,” as the object to be mastered? According to Smith, the answer lies in recovering an awareness of the significant overlap between moral and intellectual problems with respect to the understanding of the human person. Such a recovery did not, in his view, entail the revival of an outdated conception of the humanities. Rather, it aimed at expanding what was, to his mind, the parochial scope of the Western scientific *Weltanschauung* and reconsidering, in contemporary terms, the relationship between science, knowledge, and virtue.

The notion that science, properly and expansively understood, requires virtue is evident in Smith’s work on truth and objectivity from the 1970s onwards, but is most explicitly stated in his first major statement as a scholar of comparative religion. There, without having time to pursue the question, he asks “whether science, in evolving so as to create also a science of religion, might have to recapture an emphasis which in the early Greek phase it had, but has subsequently discarded” (1950: 56). He elaborates:

Science at that early stage was still rather speculative with regard to the object of inquiry. It was only at the beginning of the early modern period that it fully developed the experimental control of the natural sciences, with we might say, a sense of the relation between intellectual truth and the severely practical as regards the object. But it meanwhile had lost the Greek sense of a relation between intellectual and practical truth in the agent—the sense that knowledge is bound up with virtue, and the pursuit of truth is a moral and spiritual discipline. Perhaps to see the kind of truth with which religion deals, or in fact to see the truth about humanity, even the scientific student must somehow and in some measure learn to be a good man. (1950: 56)

Smith’s concern is not the putative immorality of objectivity or the natural sciences. He submits that “objectivity is the correct, scientific way of dealing intellectually with objects; but that it must be supplemented

when what is to be known is other than, or more than, an object—for instance, is a person, or a work of art, or a tribe” (1997c: 123). The defect of a strictly objective and impersonal approach to the knowledge of persons is, in Smith’s view, again, not that it is too scientific, but rather that it is not scientific enough. Elsewhere, he states, “I hold it manifest that an understanding of human society does not deserve to be called scientific if it omits the characteristically humane; if it does not see and interpret society as human in the fullest, deepest, most transcendent sense” (1997c: 122).

Smith suggests that something more is required with respect to what is more than or other than an object. But what is that something more? To the model of objective, impersonal knowing that he took to be characteristic of the sciences, Smith posits an alternative: a model of knowing grounded in “two-way” loving relationships. Rationality divorced from such relationships, he suggests, runs the risk of becoming overly abstract, and thus neglectful of the concrete actuality of persons and their faith. But relationships that are not informed by rationality run the risk of becoming ignorant, exclusive, and parochial. Smith aims to provide a safeguard against both tendencies, and, further, to show how rationalist-personalist love, as modeled within the study of religion, can serve as a foundation of world community.

THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND THE LIMITS OF LOVE

How are we to understand the significance of Smith’s notion of love for the study of religion? Here, there are some promising possibilities as well as some questions and difficulties. First, we shall examine some of the questions and difficulties. Given his commitment to some of the norms of twentieth-century existentialist personalism, in what sense may Smith be understood to be a rationalist? Cracknell remarks that “Smith refers to himself as an intellectual living within the tradition of classical humanism, and more specifically as within the neo-Platonic tradition. . . . Certainly he possesses an active neo-Platonic imagination” (2001: 18). While this is not wrong, it is, I think, descriptive of only one dimension of Smith’s multi-faceted imagination. Cracknell fails to account for the ways in which Smith’s thought also *contests* neo-Platonic norms. He focuses on friendship as a mode of reciprocal relationship among equals that preserves difference and invites the practice of mutual judgment and instruction (Smith 1978: 80-81), rather than on individual *eros* as a prompt to solitary ascent and union with the One. Neoplatonism, of course, entails no special commitment to pluralism as a response to

religious diversity, much less to historicism.²⁰ One question, then, is how we are to reconcile the universalistic aspects of Smith's thought with his strong commitment to religious pluralism, as well as to the norms and modes of thought upon which it depends.

Here, I think that it is especially crucial to keep in mind Smith's capacious understanding of friendly love as (1) a designedly hybrid moral and intellectual norm; (2) a hermeneutic that applies to texts written at any period of time, rather than just the present; and (3) a relational structure that is meant to encompass empathic judgment *and* critical detachment with respect to religious otherness. One is not, however, in Smith's account, to assume that one has mastered otherness through such detachment. In fact, what John Ross Carter describes as Smith's concept of "disciplined empathy" (1993: 75) with religious others is designed to correct for the tendency to pretend to such mastery. At least notionally, in subjecting one's claims to the judgment of one's interreligious friends as equals, one invites correction without risking demolition. The personal aspect of this process keeps it grounded in concrete, sympathetic interactions between individuals. We aim not only to do justice to others, in the sense of giving them the attention that is minimally due to them, but also to go beyond justice to friendship. Friendship, in this sense, is informed by the love of wisdom; it is this love which prompts us to look outside of ourselves, to pursue truth in common with others. Knowledge is pursued in isolation at the cost of truth: until such time as we know all that we need to know by ourselves, we need to engage in "give and take" with others.

Taking Smith's notions of love into account might help in the attempt to articulate and reformulate the questions underlying Smith's work, a task which Talal Asad took up in his important article on Smith in 2001. There, Asad develops and complicates a complaint that is commonly lodged against Smith by his critics: that, in distinguishing personal faith from cumulative tradition, he underestimated what Smith himself called "the central foundational importance of community, especially in religious life" (1992: 18). To the extent that we view traditions as the collective expressions and constructions of a given community, as articulated over time and in practice, there is merit to this criticism. To sever faith from cumulative tradition, and then to proceed to privilege faith alone as being properly "religious," can reasonably be seen as an attempt to

²⁰On universalism in Porphyry, see Hargis (1999: 79–82); on universalism in Plotinus, see Martin (2000: 65).

extricate some intangible, ahistorical essence of religious experience from the communal (and political) matrix in which it originated.

Asad, while taking into account Smith's foundational opposition to essentialist accounts of "religion" and his attempt to counter this ostensibly reified concept by breaking it up into faith and cumulative tradition, finds that Smith's work itself "clings to an essentialism" (2001: 205) in its evocation of a timeless, universal notion of faith. At the same time, however, he notes that Smith takes a strongly historicist view of other concepts and, even more broadly, of "objective reality" (1963b: 142). Thus, for Asad, Smith "wavers between anti-essentialism (i.e., because the idea of essence precludes change, it must be rejected by a properly historical approach) and radical skepticism (i.e., nothing in reality is definable because it is too complex, too fluid, whereas our concepts are static)" (2001: 208). That said, Asad ultimately endorses the Smithian point that "the reason for doing comparative religious study is . . . more than academic" (2001: 222). In particular, Asad holds out hope that "new social forms for experience and aspiration . . . will help to reshape the idea of tolerance—tolerance neither as indifference nor as forbearance but as mutual engagement based on human interdependence" (2001: 222). "For all the disagreements I have with Smith's book," Asad claims, "that is also what [Smith] wanted" (2001: 222). This, I think, is quite correct. But Asad never takes into account the extent to which the concept of "mutual engagement based on human interdependence" depends upon an *affec-tive* supplement to tolerance or explains how Smith set out to provide just such a supplement.

There is no particular reason why we cannot "tolerate" others while remaining indifferent to them as persons and utterly incurious as to the particulars of their religious commitments. But tolerance reconstrued as "mutual engagement" asks us to reach out to others and to engage them in conversation, with genuine humility and openness to learning from them. Respect, unlike love, has no privileged relationship to or demand for in-depth knowledge or understanding. One can arguably show respect to strangers and even enemies without seeking them out and attempting to engage them, much less converting them into friends.

It is through the practice of colloquy with interreligious friends, I suggest, that Smith implicitly compensates for the communal deficit in his account of human religious experience. To recall, Smith views the university as a locus of a rational humanist "love of wisdom" that is the "stuff of faith" (1997d: 36). Furthermore, he takes this love to be a religious tradition, as distinguished from a religion; a norm of the communal practice of colloquy; and ultimately, at least notionally, a bond that is potentially inclusive of all mankind. With respect to global theology and religious

history, intellectual colloquy, informed by the love of wisdom, performs the function of a practice that shapes faith. For Smith, an intellectual life is a life of faith (and not, for that reason, “religious”).²¹

Smith’s notion of faith, then, is selectively rather than comprehensively severed from practice and community. The community of liberal intellectuals (1992: 18) practices its faith *in community*.²² Its faith in turn is shaped by a communal practice of mutually engaged inquiry that requires friendly love, if the knowledge of persons acquired through such inquiry is to be more than superficial, as well as habituation in the ethics of enquiry.²³ The particular norm of mutual engagement rightly attributed by Asad to Smith depends for its motives upon the affective impetus posited by Smith. Thus, one specific gain that we might secure in considering Smith’s notion of love is that it may help us to account for the perceived gap between faith and communal practice in his work.

Smith’s proposal for the comparative study of religion as a seedbed of rational-personalist love that, at least in theory, could aid in the process of converting world society into world community forces the broader question of what should be hoped for with respect to the moral and practical aims not only of the study of religion but also of humanistic inquiry in general. The assumption that the specialized model of friendship characteristic of intellectual life can and necessarily ought to carry over into non-academic experience is potentially problematic in this respect. Smith acknowledges that the shift from understanding religious others as “they” to understanding them as “you,” and finally “we,” requires “erudition, critical acumen, imaginative sympathy, and penetrating understanding” as well as “time, effort, and dedication” (1981: 102). Such requirements

²¹“Intellectuals . . . have ideally been those whose commitment and loyalty to, faith in, intellectual pursuit have been total: not only passively, in that they would follow wherever the evidence or the argument might lead, but actively, dynamically, so that they would ever strive, restlessly, to search out new evidence, to think through new arguments, rejecting all that is not intellectually convincing, and striving to understand the world. Such persons at their best are monotheist: for them, truth, justice, beauty, and love . . . are ultimately one; these do not constitute a congeries of disconnected values. Also, human integrity itself is finally one with these other virtues, which appear separate only from a distance. Such persons are not henotheist: not the kind of intellectual who worships truth alone among the several virtues, and thinks of the intellect as one aspect only of life, coordinate somehow with (or disparate from) various others. Rather, for the true intellectual the intellect is that by which the personality is unified, the parts are made coherent. Nor are they polytheist, pursuing truth during the week, but God on Sunday; or pursuing the intellect and its tasks from 9 to 5, but pursuing love and community at home, and joy on the week-ends” (Smith 1997d: 40–41).

²²In Smith’s view, a “community of persons” can be constituted by as few as two people (1997c: 124).

²³I borrow the phrase “the ethics of enquiry” from MacIntyre (1999). At minimum, such an ethics entails rules that “provide security from any threat of bodily or other harm to oneself or to family and friends or to legitimate property” (1999: 6). More expansively, this ethic requires not only rules but also virtues such as truthfulness and justice (1999: 6).

apparently apply to “the person of faith” as much as to “the academic intellectual” (1981: 102). But unlike the majority of ordinary persons of faith, academic intellectuals (or, rather, a small, privileged subset of such persons) have opportunities to secure the scholarly leisure and resources necessary to acquire extensive erudition.

With respect to the prospects of the global community that Smith saw as the potential fruit of his intended reform of the study of religion, it would seem that hope for the future ought perhaps to be tempered by some reflection on the past. If we accept the distinction between society and community, we must, I think, reject the suggestion (endorsed by Smith) that historians will remember the twentieth century as one in which all peoples came together and, for the first time, became one community. It seems at least as likely that the twentieth century will be remembered as one ravaged by carnage²⁴ as much as one brought together by communication. One of the lessons of this century, as George Steiner, among others, points out is that:

We now realize that extremes of collective hysteria and savagery can coexist with a parallel conservation and, indeed, further development of the institutions, bureaucracies, and professional codes of high culture. In other words, the libraries, museums, theatres, universities, research centers, in and through which the transmission of the humanities and sciences mainly take place, can prosper next to the concentration camps. (1971: 77)

Smith’s vision cannot tolerate such a realization. It assumes a high level of permeability in the membrane between the academic and non-academic spheres of existence, such that the influence of rationalist-personalist love, as generated among intellectuals engaged in the comparative study of religion, will spill over or otherwise mysteriously radiate outwards, in theory extending to everyone. Previously incompatible and egotistical religious traditions will come to recognize that wholeness lies in being parts of a larger whole, rather than in developing a comprehensive view of that same whole. For Smith, “Every comprehensive Weltanschauung, insofar as it achieves the coherence at which it aims therein reduces every alternative one: misunderstanding, distorting, its neighbors’ world-view” (1984: 6).

At the same time, Smith asserts an apparently unbridgeable gap within the human species between the wise, or at least the knowing, and “the minority of those not quite *sapientes* enough to have sensed what

²⁴See Conquest (2000).

kind of universe we live in and what kind of being we are” (1984: 9). How are persons in the minority position to be understood as potential friends, and, hence, as referees on the acceptability and compatibility of the views of religious intellectuals? Smith himself provides us with little guidance on this question, but some years later, in reflecting on his own earlier remark about the gap between the majority and “the minority of those not quite *sapientes* enough to have sensed what kind of universe we live in,” he added that “from another perspective” we might take into account “one more minority whose *sapientia* is of a different form from their fellow’s, with that difference requiring to be explained” (1992: 17). Most of his thought, however, is marked by a sharp opposition between acceptable and unacceptable views.

For example, Smith suggests that claims of religious traditions that are characterized as being “incompatible” with other traditions will either be modified in light of the views of others or “perish” (1978: 81). There is no suggestion that the people who subscribe to such fatally flawed views might have something to offer by way of opportunities for learning in their unredeemed state of incompatibility. In this context, there are alert, modern, engaged people who take the right view of things, who are part of the project of raising human consciousness and benefiting the human race, and then there are those whose views are simply not compatible and are, in fact, “immoral” (1978: 81). Absent a willingness to participate in the collective editing process recommended by Smith, it would seem, they will always be.

From one angle, there is a substantial overlap in Smith’s thought between the limits of intellectual community and those of world community. Both include intelligent devout people who, in coming to know each other, come to love one another as well. At stake here, again, is not a mode of love which bestows itself upon the unintelligent and intelligent alike, but rather rationalist-personalist love, which singles out, on grounds of personal preference, a subset of select intelligent, modern people from whom one may learn and by whom one may be corrected. The circle of friendship arising directly out of what Smith terms “a living encounter—a large scale face-to-face meeting between persons of diverse faiths” (1959: 32) is necessarily limited by the limitations of materiality and embodiment, which prevent even all the intellectuals in the world from engaging in face-to-face meetings with one another, and by the regrettable fact that such meetings do not always issue in friendships.

Smith’s model of hermeneutical friendship, however, compensates to some extent for the necessary limitations of its “face-to-face” counterpart. There is, he suggests, cause to doubt the scholarly merits of those who do not *read* in a spirit of friendly love. In defending his argument for

friendship against criticism, he explains, “My suggesting that friendship is an enormously valuable help towards understanding a religious position other than one’s own, does, perhaps, seem to reflect an orientation towards living religious communities,” but, he suggests, somewhat playfully, it need not do so: “We study not merely things, but the interaction between things and persons; this is why friendship is not irrelevant—not even for the past. . . . One of my friends, I could say, the Muslim essayist and commentator Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzāni, died 600 years ago” (1973: 70). His model of friendship, then, is meant to counter the historical parochialism of “presentism” as much as geographical parochialism. Smith indicates that he “should be inclined to distrust” anyone in the field of classics who did not have “friends among the ancients” (Smith 1973: 70). Some years later, he suggested that scholars of a given religion who do not feel love for features of the tradition itself, and have no friends who participate in it, are similarly suspect: “In the study of religion, I would distrust any scholar of the Hindus who does not love India, or any interpreter of the Islamics who had no Muslim friends” (1975: 11). The intellectual community, to his mind, is one in which a capacity for particular sorts of love is an indicator of general trustworthiness and, indeed, professional competence.

If one accepts that conflict and constitutive difference regarding the proper modes and objects of love is part of communal life, then the intellectual community and a putative world community would not seem to overlap very much at all. In theory, although not necessarily in practice, the former may be governed by friendships among people who, despite their differences, share a common love of wisdom and truth, or, at least, knowledge. But the latter sort of community is driven by rival loves and the conflicting loyalties that flow from them, loves which may possibly but do not necessarily include one another.

Smith has frequently been accused of having imported the norms of liberal Protestantism into his project for the reform of the study of religion, and, indeed, implicitly, of not being able to tell the difference between his project and that of liberal Protestantism. If this were the case, there would presumably be considerable overlap between Smith’s “rationalist-personalist” love and the notion of love characteristic of liberal Protestantism. To be sure, Smith focuses on faith. But this is not adequate grounds, in and of itself, for the common claim that his historical work is “crypto-Protestant” (Hawley 2006: 117) in nature.²⁵ Protestantism is surely relevant in the context, but the picture is more

²⁵On the role of Smith’s Protestantism in his thought, see Pruet (1990: 409–410).

complicated than the image of outward secular academic discourse concealing an inward crypto-Protestantism suggests. Smith hardly pretends that his work is purely secular. As I have indicated, his understanding of faith pertains to “faith in intellectual pursuit” (Smith 1997d: 40) as well as varieties of faith more commonly recognized to be “religious.”²⁶ He is quite clear that faith entails love—not only of truth but of goodness or God as well as one’s neighbor (1979a: 169). Smith makes love constitutive of rationality, but he also tries to make the desires particular to rationality comport with loves that are commonly understood to be suprarational.

A vision of love comprising (1) an intellectual desire for knowledge; (2) a quasi-Aristotelian version of *philia* as love between virtuous equals; (3) twentieth-century existentialist personalist notions of truth as experienced and verified in intellectual encounter; and (4) the love of goodness, God, and neighbors is not neatly consonant with the vision of love characteristic of any variant of liberal Protestantism with which I am familiar. While Smith allots preferential friendly love a central place in his vision by tethering it to the mutual discovery and verification of truth, liberal Protestantism has tended to object strenuously to the affective inequality entailed in preferential love, preferring instead, at least notionally, as both means and end, love that measures itself by the standard of justice-as-equality and does not make distinctions among persons. Smith recognizes that not *all* modern intelligent intellectuals are friends with one other; the reason why one such person attracts us and another does not is ultimately, it would seem, mysterious. Smith attempts to make preferential friendly love point toward universalistic ends, but his work gives rise to questions about how exactly the former can serve the latter while maintaining its stated requirement of erudition and critical acumen, as well as its unstated requirements of elective affinity and scholarly leisure.

In the end, I think that Smith’s theory of love relies for its unstable universality on his adaptation (along personalist-existentialist lines) of the Aristotelian notion of the universal desire to know more than on Christian understandings of egalitarian *agape* love. It is the desire to know for which Smith praises the modern West: “Ever since the opening sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, at least, the West has felt and honored the impulse to find out: about this, that, and everything. . . . The imperious urge to understand is eventually forcing us to revise our

²⁶Notably, Smith has been accused of crypto-Protestantism rather than crypto-German existentialism with respect to his concept of intellectual faith, which might be fruitfully compared and contrasted with Jaspers’s concept of *philosophische Glaube*. To be sure, the latter is itself indebted to Jaspers’s own intellectual Protestantism.

categories, as it becomes clear that only so can we understand more adequately; only so can we avoid intellectual error" (1984: 9). This universal "impulse," as mediated through intellectual friendship, is the force fueling the forced revision of categories upon which Smith's project depends. Yet, as I have already indicated, he does not suggest that this desire is democratically distributed with respect to its relative fulfillment.

Smith's work invites the question of what is common to intelligent and unintelligent persons: if, as he suggests, the historic task of modern intellectuals is to promote "planetary intellectual cohesion" within which "the rich diversity of cultural and ideational forms will be understood by intelligent men and women everywhere" (1979a: 152), then where does that leave persons who are regarded, rightly or wrongly, as lacking in intelligence? They implicitly figure in this scenario as beneficiaries or passive bystanders. He openly acknowledges the "stark problem" that arises from his "own intellectualist bias" (1979a: 163) while not connecting it with the question of the potential contributions of "uninformed or unintelligent" (1979a: 162) persons to the process of global community-building that he has in mind.

These problems notwithstanding, the view that Smith's vision is reducible to a late survival of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal, essentialist idealism does not, I think, do justice to his project. Smith is upfront about the normative intentions of that project which, at points, suggest liberal, idealistic, and even arguably utopian ends such as "planetary intellectual cohesion." But the question of what sort of moral work scholarship in the humanities does in the world, relative to that of science, and how scholarship should accommodate its normative intentions is separate from the question of how one distinguishes a desirable, high normative aim in this context from an implicitly undesirable, utopian one. Smith's work should encourage us to complicate our understanding of the boundaries between the former and the latter.²⁷

Smith has been criticized as an implicitly self-deluded idealist who fails to realize the impotence of his "tepid liberal corrective to the 'exclusionary' discourses sponsored by certain strands of Christianity and the hegemonic 'western' culture in which those strands are socially legitimated" (Surin 1990: 126, n1). Worse, his work is thought to provide bromides to assist oppressors in their attempt to ward off knowledge of

²⁷For a discussion (in a different context) of the "subtle but very real distinction" between utopian and idealistic yet critical thinking, see Shklar (1994).

the grave harm that they are inflicting on others (Surin 1990: 119). In writing of Smith, Kenneth Surin states that “one can only hope . . . that God sees the world somewhat differently than does the author of *Towards a World Theology*” (1990: 123, n18). In his account, some of Smith’s views are so offensive that they should have been left unuttered: “It is better to keep silent than to utter such platitudes as ‘the truth of all of us is part of the truth of each of us’. . . . Such platitudes can only bring comfort and satisfaction to those who do not want the screams of our society to be heard” (1990: 127, n11). Surin does not name “those who do not want the screams of our society to be heard” or engage in argument with them or with Smith, as the supposed purveyor of comfort to such individuals.

Generally speaking, the critique of Smith’s idealism fails to attend to the extent to which he acknowledges the material basis of change within the study of religion, even as he retains a place for human agency, and for the ideas generated through collective discourse as sources of such change. For example, Russell McCutcheon, in commenting on the postwar attempt to reconfigure the study of religion of which Smith was a part, argues that “Although . . . idealists [such as Smith] might not want to recognize this, they . . . are prompted to reconfigure the discipline by means of their talk of urgency, crisis, and newness—a reconfiguring prompted by changes in concretely material factors, namely the redistribution of global political, military, and economic resources” (2003: 77). His idealism notwithstanding, Smith is entirely cognizant of the material basis of his project. He makes it plain that his program of reform is a response to the sweeping material changes wrought by technology and economic change. His vision of world community follows from the perception that, as he put it in 1962, “The technological and economic aspects of [the creation of a world community] are already vigorously under way” (1963a: 12). While there are certainly aspects of Smith’s thought which suggest idealism, the notion that he would not have wanted to recognize that his proposed reconfiguration of the discipline was prompted by change in material factors is not one of them. Smith, like many other thinkers in the mid-twentieth century, was invested in the notion that the world had undergone material changes but not the moral and spiritual change requisite to adapt to altered conditions.

Broadly speaking, I think that the widespread confusion concerning the nature and implications of Smith’s idealism may follow from a failure to consider Smith’s work in the context of the mid-twentieth century conversation about proposed intellectual, ethical, and theological responses to scientific and economic change out of which it emerged. In this context, I have emphasized the extent to which he sought to

supplement the achievements of natural science, and address the situation produced by technological change.²⁸

Normatively speaking, Smith's work raises the question of what steps should be taken to include persons whom we do not regard as friends, and whose views—and modes of love—may be incompatible with those of other traditions, in the process of interreligious colloquy. Should we seek to understand the role of friendly love in the study of religion with respect to broader human concerns, it would seem that we ought to take into account the fact that such love is but one mode of love among others, not all of which center around the rational pursuit of truth. Yet Smith's vision could conceivably be enlarged to account for the love that one may receive from and extend to others who are neither modern nor intelligent, yet by whom one might still, for all that, perhaps be enlightened.

CONCLUSION: THE RELEVANCE OF LOVE TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

We have to learn to love, learn to be charitable. . . . Hatred likewise has to be learned and nourished.

—Friedrich Nietzsche (1997: 192)

In 1918, Max Weber published his seminal essay *Science as a Vocation*, in which he argues that passion plays a crucial role in scholarly life, and, indeed, in human activities as such (Strong 2002: 26). For Weber, as Tracy Strong points out, “one gives oneself over, not to a person, but to something abstract and conceptual” (2002: 40). It remained for Jaspers to integrate “loving contest” (1951: 26) between persons into the project of intellectual inquiry, but for all of his talk of historic concreteness, Jaspers's “others” have an oddly abstract quality to them.

Today, we hear relatively little about the role of personal passions and qualities of character as aspects of intellectual or, at least, academic experience. The coincidence of the good scholar—whether humanist or scientist—with the good person is neither taken to be a given nor much explored as a question. In recent years, however, there has been an uptick of interest in the personal dimensions of scholarly life. For example, historian of science Steven Shapin has sought to provide a moral history of scientific inquiry, and, in doing so, to “highlight the significance of personal familiarity and personal virtue” in late modern technoscience

²⁸For Smith's comment on the merits and defects of science, and his claim that “the historian has access to more truth than does the scientist,” see Smith (1997a: 13)

(2008: 312).²⁹ A comparable effort would perhaps be of value in assessing what (to borrow Shapin's term) seems to be the "normative uncertainty" (2008: 312) and, I would add, the affective uncertainty, that characterizes the study of religion. Such uncertainty, I think, is an important subtext of recent debates about the role of religion in arts and sciences curricula.³⁰

One wonders what, in the unlikely or even fantastic event that the idea that some form of love, however attenuated, were to be deemed an essential part of the study of religion, might be the challenges entailed. First would be the considerable challenge of identifying the role that various forms of love *already* play in the study of religion, even when we do not take much notice of them. There is, of course, the love of wisdom, which we tend to forget is a love of which many of us are nominally doctors. Is this a mode of love from which the love has long since fled, leaving in its place only—what? Curiosity? Research interests? Career plans? Or is it still in fact an active of love, albeit one that is not commonly identified as such? Secondly, one would have to think of love as it pertains to religious otherness in the context of study, and, ultimately, to religious others themselves. I do not think that it is far-fetched to say that many people who have developed interreligious friendships in the context of studying religion have found that such friendships have, in fact, added in some way to their understanding of their friends' religions and perhaps to that of their own as well. But we need to provide an account of the reason why that might be the case. While the purposive conjunction of rationalism and personalism is extremely important for understanding Smith's work, we need not necessarily retain those terms in thinking through the question of what various modes of love add to our knowledge of religions that we cannot get from research and critical thinking alone, and in determining the circumstances under which love is inappropriate or irrelevant. Smith's work invites us to consider the possibility that some sort of love or passion—perhaps the "passion for truthfulness" (Williams 2002: 2)—drives research and even the very act of critical thinking.

Should one concede, for the sake of argument, that love (or even its less intellectually embarrassing relative, empathy) has something to add to the comparative study of religion, what would that do to our understanding of programs of study and pedagogy in this context? Can love be taught by the unloving as much as by their opposites? Beyond that, what

²⁹For brief but suggestive remarks on affect and friendship in this context, see Shapin (2010: 300, 311).

³⁰On the topic of religion and science in a debate about university curricula, see Nord (2010: 117–118).

should be the limits of love in this respect? Here, we are in the realm of speculation. Ought students of religion to be taught to heed something like the advice of Father Zosimus in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamozov*, namely, to "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything" (1976: 356–357)? Is there a trans-traditional or secular equivalent of such advice? Should we grant that we need to love in order to know more fully, it would still not be clear where love ought to begin and end. Why should it stop at persons if love is indeed the condition of knowing a religion or a civilization in all of its complexity, actuality, and mystery?

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