

Amen:
Faith and the Possibility
of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue

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A newly elected member of the *Académie française* traditionally begins his or her tenure in that body by delivering a tribute to the predecessor in the particular chair that the newly elected member is to occupy. This custom has sometimes prevented some French candidates from putting their names forward for particular chairs in the *Académie* because they don't want to praise a deceased predecessor whom they disliked. Academic rage, not unlike love, is as strong as death, to paraphrase the Song of Songs (8:6). The Laurence J. McGinley Chair in Religion and Society at Fordham University, however, is not a chair in the *Académie française*, nor am I reluctant to praise my predecessor.

But I would be remiss in delivering this first McGinley lecture not to say a few words as well about Father Laurence J. McGinley, S.J., after whom the Chair is named. Father McGinley, President of Fordham University from 1949 to 1963, gathered together at Lincoln Center the Manhattan divisions of Fordham University. Father McGinley envisioned what has become Fordham's vibrant presence at the intellectual heart of this great city, just north of what my generation still recalls as Hell's Kitchen.

I. Dulles and Smith: *Curricula Vitae*

Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., who held the McGinley Chair for two decades, taught me in three courses at Woodstock College in Maryland in the 1960s. Father Dulles, as he was then, exercised a profound influence on many of his students. Born of a

New York Presbyterian family in 1918, by the age of eighteen Avery Dulles considered himself an agnostic. During his undergraduate years at Harvard he went through profound intellectual and spiritual changes, converting to Catholicism just after graduating in 1940. After a short stint in law school, followed by four years in the navy, Avery Dulles entered the Society of Jesus in 1946. When his novitiate was completed he studied philosophy at Woodstock for three years, taught undergraduate philosophy for two years at Fordham, and then returned to Woodstock for four years of theological studies, during which he was ordained a priest. Doctoral studies in theology followed at the Gregorian University in Rome. Then Dulles taught at Woodstock for fourteen years and subsequently at Catholic University in Washington for another fourteen years. He came back to Fordham in 1988 for the newly-created McGinley Chair. His most famous writing over the years approached the nature of the church, revelation and faith in terms of various models that throw light on these subjects. Elevated to the College of Cardinals in 2001, Cardinal Dulles died last December at the age of ninety.

It was at Woodstock more than four decades ago that Avery Dulles directed me towards graduate studies at Harvard in comparative religion and Islamic studies. He felt that I would have much to learn under the tutelage of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the eminent Canadian historian of religion, whom we both first met at Woodstock in 1967.

Smith, born in Toronto in 1916, was raised Presbyterian, like Dulles. At the age of seventeen, however, Smith first visited Egypt and it opened up for him a wider world. Unlike Dulles, Smith remained within the Calvinist tradition of Christianity all his life, eventually being ordained during a lengthy sojourn in the 1940s as a teacher in Lahore, then still in India. A Social Gospel activist and President of the Student Christian

Movement as a youth, Smith also considered himself a socialist. His analysis of modern Islam in India, which he submitted as a doctoral dissertation at Cambridge, was rejected for its Marxism and anti-colonialism, stances not then popular at Cambridge. After successfully completing in 1948 a different doctoral thesis at Princeton, Smith taught at McGill University in Montreal, founding its Institute of Islamic Studies. In 1964 he migrated to Harvard, where he taught the comparative history of religion and headed the Center for the Study of World Religions. Retiring back to Canada permanently in 1984, Smith died in February 2000 at the age of eighty-three. It was Avery Dulles who took it in hand to break the news to me, since I was far away in Africa at the time.

II. Smith and Dulles on Faith

Both Cardinal Dulles and Professor Smith were particularly famous for their writings on the subject of faith. This evening, together with my friends who are also former students of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Rabbi Polish and Professor Hussain, I would like to explore some thoughts on the importance of the category of faith for promoting intellectual and spiritual exchange among Jews, Christians and Muslims. I use the neologism ‘trialogue’ for this particular form of inter-faith encounter.

I have been privileged over several decades to study the scriptural sources and some of the subsequent theological development not only of the Jewish and Christian traditions, but also, at least since 1968, of the Islamic tradition. Here in America I have learned from Jews, and during many years in Africa I learned from Muslims. I have come to realize over the years that we use many of the same religious categories in ways that are in some sense the same and in some sense different. This evening I want to spell out some of the similarities and differences in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim

understandings of faith, and to suggest why those similarities and differences can give us hope for a future of mutual understanding.

What do we mean by faith? Both Cardinal Dulles and Professor Smith, as I just mentioned, have written several books each with the word 'faith' in the title.¹ In this evening's forum I wish to sum up briefly the thought of Wilfred Cantwell Smith on faith, as well as that of Avery Dulles, as a preliminary to describing how an understanding of faith I will propose, somewhat different in scope, might help Jews, Christians and Muslims of the present day to understand each other, to recognize our cousinship.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, not unlike Paul Tillich, thought of faith as a term characterizing all human openness to transcendent reality. Tillich famously characterized faith as "the state of being ultimately concerned,"² and Smith liked that definition, although he found some ambiguity in it.³ For Smith, faith could not be reduced to belief or beliefs. In an earlier work of his,⁴ he broke up the concept of religion into two components: faith, characterized as a personal orientation to the transcendent Other, and cumulative traditions, the various ways in which human beings have expressed their faith.

For Christians the expression of their faith has often entailed the elaboration of creeds, organized statements of the content of faith or beliefs. But liturgy, sacred music, mysticism, asceticism and heroic charity have also played important roles as expressions of faith within the cumulative tradition of Christianity, and sometimes more interestingly than have creeds. We Western Christians are more devoted to Saint Francis of Assisi than we are to Saint Cyril of Alexandria. (Eastern Christians, and especially Copts, might feel differently.) But the ways in which human beings outside the Christian circle have

expressed their faith have not always been so creedal, so propositional, so concentrated on orthodoxy of belief.

The faith of Jews and Muslims, for instance, has more commonly expressed itself in life lived according to the Law: Torah or Shari‘a. The study of how this can and must be done has provided Jews and Muslims with their central intellectual traditions. Both Jews and Muslims have at times elaborated propositional creeds, but theology has been less central to Judaism and Islam than it has been to Christianity. Christians often misunderstand the cumulative traditions and Law-centered lives of observant Jews and Muslims. Combating inter-faith misunderstanding of this sort will provide grist for the mill I hope to be operating under the auspices of the McGinley Chair.

As Smith realized in historical studies of how the word ‘belief’ had changed since the late sixteenth century, and most precipitously since the eighteenth century,⁵ English-speaking Christians once could use the words ‘belief’ and ‘faith’ interchangeably, but in subsequent eras, and especially as a result of Enlightenment skepticism, ‘belief’ or ‘beliefs’—increasingly defined as the formulations of the content of faith—went intellectually downhill. This decline proved so steep that a 1966 Random House dictionary used as an example of the word belief, “the belief that the world is flat.”⁶ Although ‘belief’ and ‘believe’ are English cognates of the German *belieben*, to cherish or hold dear, these words in English have come to designate over the last two centuries or so something more tentative: ‘to hold an opinion,’ not always very strongly, and sometimes quite erroneously.

Faith has no verbal form in English and can only be expressed in somewhat awkward phrases like ‘I put my faith in,’ ‘I keep faith with,’ ‘I have faith in,’ ‘I pledge

my faith to.’ ‘Faith’ as a term maintains a stronger sense of the engagement of oneself with another, one’s equal, at least, as in fidelity in marriage, or one’s superior, as when one puts faith in God. The limitations of English in this matter, where faith and belief have traveled separate paths in the last few centuries, are not the limitations of other languages. In German, where the verb *glauben* and the noun *Glaube* have obviously closer ties, translation into English of discourse on this subject is often faulty.⁷

Perhaps because of his own restlessness with some of the more doctrinaire elements of Calvinist Christianity and the theological certainties of some of his missionary colleagues in India,⁸ Smith was eventually predisposed to think of faith as something much more personal and individual,⁹ more deeply based in human experience than any intellectual formulation of creedal affirmations or ideological axioms. Thus, as early as 1962, Smith wrote:

My faith is an act that *I* make, myself, naked before God. Just as there is no such thing as Christianity (or Islam or Buddhism) . . . behind which the Christian (the Muslim, the Buddhist) may shelter, which he may set between himself and the terror and splendour and living concern of God, so there is no generic Christian faith, no ‘Buddhist faith’, no ‘Hindu faith’, no ‘Jewish faith’. There is only my faith and yours, and that of my Shinto friend, or my particular Jewish neighbour.¹⁰

Dulles was not entirely happy with Smith’s disjunction between faith and beliefs, implicit in Smith’s distaste for phrases like ‘Christian faith,’ although he recognized that Smith’s fellow Canadian and Dulles’ fellow Jesuit, Bernard Lonergan, held an opinion in his later writings at least somewhat similar to that of Smith, although not entirely the same.¹¹

Dulles himself, in the concluding synthesis of his 1994 work on faith, summed up his teaching on faith in several theses. As an anthropological reality, Dulles thought of faith as “*a constant feature of human cognition and existence,*” the faith most of us have in our laptops and their manufacturers. In theological terms, however—the only terms

that really interested him—Dulles conceived of faith as both cognitive and existential: “*Faith . . . is a self-surrender to God as he reveals himself.*”¹² Dulles insisted in this context on the absolute priority of God as the one who invites human persons to faith:

By making himself discernibly present in human history by signs and symbols, God calls men and women to participate in his own divine life. Faith in its full and integral reality is more than a merely intellectual assent or an act of blind trust. It is a complex act in which assent, trust, obedience and loving self-commitment are interwoven.¹³

Both Smith and Dulles have concentrated on faith as a human response to the divine, but Dulles understood this response more obviously within the mainline theological tradition of Christianity. For Smith, faith is a universal human orientation to the transcendent, not always focused so clearly on a personal God at work in history. Whether this use of the term ‘faith’ to signify a universal human orientation is equally valid across all religious frontiers I will not discuss this evening. I content myself with a modest examination of faith in the scriptures revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

III. Covenant and the Bilateral Nature of Faith

Understanding the bilateral nature of faith, its divine-human reciprocity as God’s fidelity to humankind and humankind’s fidelity to God, can help us to see the unique closeness of Jews, Christians and Muslims. By this bilateral, reciprocal nature of faith I mean to suggest that the ultimate context of faith as a concept can be found in the divine-human bonding that the Hebrew Bible calls covenant (*bērît*), the New Testament develops as a new covenant (*kainē diathēkē*) and the Qur’ān calls *mīthāq* or ‘*ahd*’.

1. Faith and Covenant in the Hebrew Bible

Neither the five Books of the Torah nor the whole of the Hebrew Bible exhaust all that the Jewish tradition for more than three millennia has thought about covenant and

faith. But it is essential to know precisely what the Hebrew Bible teaches about covenant and faith. The Hebrew Bible, in an attempt to describe Israel's relationship to its Lord, may borrow imagery from a legal instrument used in the international law of ancient times, the suzerainty covenant. The Sinai covenant (Exodus 20:1-17) and the Shechem covenant (Joshua 24:2-27) seem in some generic sense to exemplify the literary influence of such second-millennium B.C.E. suzerainty treaties,¹⁴ but contemporary Neo-Assyrian suzerainty treaties of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. may more likely have affected the literary form of Deuteronomy, written in the same era. Neo-Assyrian treaties demand that vassal states accept Assyrian overlordship, insisting under pain of curse that the people also accept the successor to the current Assyrian king. Deuteronomy brilliantly adapts this treaty form to describe the relation of Israel to its true Suzerain.¹⁵

Other covenant formularies can be found at prominent junctions throughout the Hebrew Bible. Grant covenants in the Hebrew Bible have fewer detailed stipulations (or commandments), most notable examples including the covenant God made with Noah (Genesis 9: 1-17), with Abraham (Genesis 15: 1-21, Genesis 17: 1-27) and with David (2 Samuel 7:4-46). Parity covenants are covenants between equals, such as that between Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 18:3-4, 20:8, 14-17).

The suzerainty covenants of the Hebrew Bible make grander claims than do the suzerain-vassal treaties of the Near East, given the transcendent suzerainty of God and the specially chosen status of Israel. The loyalty of Israel as vassal to God responds to the prior choice of Israel by God. This preeminent loyalty of God is most dramatically portrayed in the account of the renewal of the covenant of Sinai after Israel's sin of worshipping the golden calf. God's naming of himself in the preamble to this renewed

covenant features what has been called in later Jewish tradition the thirteen attributes of mercy,¹⁶ showing God to be more merciful and more loyal to the covenant than might be expected of any worldly suzerain dealing with a vassal: “The Lord! The Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin (Exodus 34: 6-7a).¹⁷

The seventh and eight attributes of the Lord in this passage, *rab-h□esed we-’ēmet* (“abounding in kindness and faithfulness” in the JPS translation),¹⁸ can be described as the core of God’s preeminent loyalty to the renewed covenant of Sinai. *H□esed* and *’ēmet* in combination are an example of what classical rhetoricians called hendiadys: one single meaning intended by two words in combination.¹⁹ Thus the phrase may be translated as loving fidelity or faithful love.²⁰ The graciousness of God is demonstrated in God’s extending a covenant to humankind. God’s unceasing fidelity to that covenant—God’s ‘truth’ in the sense of God remaining true to the divine promises—is what the phrase *rab-h□esed we-’ēmet* denotes.

Faith in the Hebrew Bible, then, originates in and is expressed most perfectly by the prior initiative of a faithful and loving God, God’s *h□esed we-’ēmet*. Human faith in God and Israel’s faith in God are finite responses to that prior faithful love of God. The Ten Commandments are not so much important because of the originality of their content as for their assertion that they are the words of God. Human obedience to those words defines an Israelite as one covenanted with God.²¹ The noun ‘faith’ (in Hebrew, *’ēmûnah*) occurs less frequently in the Hebrew Bible than forms of the verb with that tri-

consonantal root (*'ālep-mêm-nûn*).²² This root basically connotes security of attachment to, or safety of emplacement in or on, something outside the subject. Thus the human ability to keep faith with God, to attach oneself entirely to God or to surrender oneself to emplacement in or on the One who extends a covenant to creatures, is the central narrative of the Hebrew Bible. Apt examples of this motif can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible, most famously in the account of God showing Abraham the stars as a promise of the extent of his progeny: “And because he [Abraham] put his trust in the Lord, He [the Lord] reckoned it to his merit” (Genesis 15:6).²³ In a notoriously difficult passage in the prophet Isaiah, playing on the different significations of the tri-consonantal root (*'ālep-mêm-nûn*), God speaks to the pusillanimous king of Judah, Ahaz, when that king was confronted with the threat of the Syro-Ephraimite invasion of Judah in 735 B.C.E.: “If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all” (Isaiah 7:9).²⁴

Faith in the Hebrew Bible, then, is not a set of beliefs, as Smith and many Jewish authors have constantly insisted.²⁵ It manifests itself as a bilateral, reciprocal relationship between God and human beings, with the suzerain *hîesed we-’emet* of God eliciting and even demanding from human beings, as individuals or as a community, the response of faith or fidelity. The word *’Āmên*—repeated after each of the twelve curses the people of Israel call down on themselves if they fail to keep the covenant as delineated in Deuteronomy—symbolizes that response most dramatically (Deuteronomy 27:15-26). Although *’Āmên* is often translated loosely as “So be it!,” it is actually something much stronger, an oath of fidelity: “I put my faith in this,” or rather, and much more importantly, “I pledge my fidelity to You.”

2. Faith and Covenant in the New Testament

If covenant is the central term of the Hebrew Bible, faith (*pistis*) and its related verbal and adjectival cognates explode as terms in the New Testament.²⁶ It is impossible to understand the New Testament without understanding it as a document written in Greek by Jews of the first century of the Common Era for whom covenant and faith are related terms in the same cultural complex. Dissidents from the Sadducee and Pharisee and Qumran interpretations of the Jewish tradition, these Messianic (or Christian) Jews were convinced that the death and resurrection of Jesus had inaugurated the new covenant proclaimed by Jeremiah: “See, a time is coming—declares the Lord—when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah . . . I will put My Teaching [*Torah*] into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God and they will be My people” (Jeremiah 31: 31, 33)²⁷

In the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke (the Synoptics), faith is first and foremost faith in God, but usually mediated by Jesus.²⁸ There are in these usages of the term ‘faith’ elements of the parity covenant between Jesus and those who seek his aid and the suzerainty and grant covenants between God and human beings. The preaching of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel begins with a call to repentance and discipleship: “The opportune moment is fulfilled; the reign of God has drawn near; change your inmost being and put your faith in the Good Proclamation” (Mark 1:15)²⁹ Although the phrase “put your faith in” in that verse is normally translated in English as “believe in,” the covenantal—indeed new covenantal—sense of this inaugural proclamation of what Jesus and the Gospel writer intend needs more emphasis. Note the stress on *metanoia*, a radical change of mind consistent with the first Christians’

understanding of Jeremiah's "new covenant" and the Torah the Lord would put "into their inmost being," inscribing it "upon their hearts."³⁰

A peculiar usage of Jesus in the Synoptics is the way certain radical sayings of Jesus are prefaced by the word 'Amen,' a word normally found at the end of prayers: "Amen, I tell you."³¹ In John's Gospel that phrase is doubled for greater emphasis: "Amen, amen, I tell you."³² Often translated 'truly' or 'truly, truly,' the peculiarity of this usage seems to signify the independence of Jesus as a teacher, deriving his teaching not from a previous authority but from his own intimate relationship with God.³³ Normally I would leave the Hebrew and Aramaic words in the Greek New Testament untranslated, but I would prefer, if translating 'Amen,' to indicate that an 'Amen' placed before a statement underlines what follows, laying great emphasis on the teaching, implicitly insisting: "Put your faith in this." The frequent repetition of this introductory phrase points to the growing New Testament tendency to refer to Jesus as the one who inaugurates a new covenant, one centered on a transformation and internalization of the Torah: "Amen, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one *yod*, not one fraction of a letter, will pass away from the Torah until all of it is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18).

Paul, in a very difficult sentence to translate, refers to Jesus himself as in some sense our 'Amen' to God, our pledge of fidelity to the Suzerain who extends a covenant to us: "In him [Jesus] every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' Wherefore, it is through him that the 'Amen' [is given] to God on our behalf for the glory [of God]" (2 Corinthians 1:20). This sentence of Paul may also correspond to the curious clause in Greek found in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians and elsewhere³⁴ that can be translated literally as follows: "The human being is not set at rights with God by deeds according to

the Torah but rather through the fidelity of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16).³⁵ In the Christian tradition it is Jesus who keeps the covenant with God perfectly. But it is a faithful God who initiates the calling of creatures into this covenant: “God is faithful through whom you have been called into the companionship of his son, the Messiah Jesus, our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). By baptism into Jesus—incorporation by the graciousness of God into companionship with him—the Christian is enabled, despite many lapses, to keep faith with God.

John’s Gospel, probably one of the last works in the New Testament to reach its present editorial completion, rivals the work of Paul in its usage of forms of the verb ‘to keep faith’ (*pisteuein*), but never uses the substantive ‘faith’ (*pistis*), which occurs 142 times in the corpus attributed to Paul. In the Fourth Gospel, ‘keeping faith’ is something one does or does not do, not an abstract concept.³⁶

Interestingly enough, the Book of Revelation, a work apparently emanating from the circle of the Beloved Disciple, a key figure in John’s Gospel, characterizes Jesus at one point as the quintessence of faith: “To the Angel of the Assembly in Laodicea, write [the following]: ‘Thus says the *Amen*, the witness both faithful and loyal, ‘the Beginning of God’s Creation’” (Revelation 3:14).³⁷ As the New Testament meditates more at length on the early Church’s experience of Jesus, it begins to understand him as a pre-existent expression of God’s Selfhood, the eternal Word and Light of God who pitches his tent in the midst of humanity (John 1: 1-18). According to the New Testament, the fidelity or faith of Jesus introduces all of humanity into an eternal covenant with God. For the Messianic Jews who attached themselves to the following of Jesus, the bilateral nature of

the covenant relationship was in some sense transcended in a divine-human unilateral covenant: God and humanity united in Jesus the Messiah.

3. *Faith and Covenant in the Qur'ān*

If covenant is the central term of the Hebrew Bible in its elaboration of the relationship between a faithful God and sometimes faithful and sometimes faithless vassals, and faith or keeping of faith lies at the core of the New Testament's account of the new covenant consummated in the union of God and humanity in Jesus, the verbal noun *īmān* ('keeping faith') and other verbal and participial transformations of the Arabic tri-consonantal root *alif-mīm-nūn* abound even more plentifully in the Qur'ān. Although covenantal language is not as central to the Qur'ān as it is to the Hebrew Bible or even the New Testament, it is far from lacking.³⁸ The word *mīthāq* occurs twenty-five times in the Qur'ān and *'ahd* twenty-nine times. Words derived from the fourth form of the tri-consonantal root *alif-mīm-nūn*, meaning either to afford security to someone or to put one's faith in someone or something,³⁹ occur hundreds of times in the Qur'ān, even if only forty-five times as the verbal noun, *īmān*.⁴⁰

One usage of the active participle *mu'min* in the Qur'ān that proves Smith's insistence that the word should not be translated as 'believer' comes in the enumeration of thirteen⁴¹ attributes or praise-names of God as something of a concluding doxology of *Sūrat al-hāshr*, a passage not entirely unlike (although independent of) the earlier mentioned thirteen attributes of mercy in the Hebrew Bible: "He is God (There is no deity but He!) Who is the Ruler, the Holy One, the Source of Peace, the Faithful One [*al-mu'min*], the Guarantor of Faith, the August One, the Compelling One, the Overwhelming One (Exalted be God above anything they may associate with Him). He is

God, the Maker, the Creator, the Shaper. To Him belong the best of names! (Everything in the heavens and on earth exalts Him!) and he is the August One, the Wise One” (Qur’ān 59:23-24).⁴²

Not only is the name “the Faithful One” (*al-mu’min*) ascribed to God in this passage significant for establishing a Quranic sense of God as the suzerain in a covenant, but the next attribute, *al-muhaymin*, which I have rendered as “the Guarantor of Faith,” derives from the verb *haimana* which has as its most basic meaning, “to say ‘amen’.”⁴³ God as the Guarantor of Faith says ‘Amen’ to those who pledge their faith, who say their ‘Amen’ to God. The word ‘Amen’ (in Arabic, either *amīn* or *āmīn*) never occurs in the Qur’ān, but Sunnī Muslims conclude the recitation of the *Sūrat al-Fātih*□a, the opening passage of the Qur’ān and the most frequently uttered prayer of Muslims, with a communal *Āmīn*. This usage also characterizes the conclusion of an individual Muslim’s prayer of petition (*du‘ā*).⁴⁴ A Syrian legal scholar of the seventh century of the Muslim calendar and the thirteenth century C.E. who was also a mystic, al-Nawawī, has left to posterity not only a legal corpus but also a much used book of devotions in which he wrote of the uniqueness of *Āmīn* in Muslim practice: “It is an approved custom that the *Āmīn* of those led in worship shall be said with that of the *imām*, neither before nor after. And this is the only place in the prayer-rite where the word of the worshipper is united with that of the *imām*, for in the other utterances he shall follow after the *imām*.”⁴⁵

This mutual pledge of faith between God and humanity implicit in at least some of the attributes or names of God—a covenant initiated by God—is most vividly depicted in the Qur’ān’s account of what later Muslim mystics have called the *Yawm Alastu* (the Day of ‘Am I not?’). It occurs just after a passage in which God rebukes the people of

Israel for their infidelity to “the covenant of the Book” (*mīthāq al-kitāb*). Precisely at this point the Qur’ān turns Muhammad’s attention to a covenant in which all of humanity is invited to respond to God. A literal translation of this passage is difficult: “When your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their offspring, and made them bear witness for themselves [to what God said]: ‘Am I not your⁴⁶ Lord?’, they said, ‘Yes, we have born witness,’ lest you say on the day of resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were ignorant about this,’ or you say, ‘It was only our forefathers who alleged that there were partners [in the Godhead] in times past, before we were their offspring after them. Will You destroy us because of what those liars did?’” (Qur’ān 7:172-173). Annemarie Schimmel, for many years a colleague of Smith’s at Harvard and a great specialist on Sufism, wrote of this “primordial covenant” that it has “impressed the religious conscience of the Muslims, and especially the Muslim mystics, more than any other idea. Here is the starting point for their understanding of free will and predestination, of election and acceptance, of God’s eternal power and man’s loving response and promise.”⁴⁷ The primordial covenant attested in the Qur’ān, like the covenant extended to Noah in the Hebrew Bible, is offered to all of humanity without exception.

For Muslims Islam is the religion of nature (*fitra*). A saying is attributed to Muhammad that “every infant is born according to *fitra* (*‘alā-l-fitra*); i.e., Allāh’s kind or way of creating; ‘on God’s plan’ . . . then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian.”⁴⁸ This saying has many levels of significance in the Islamic tradition, not excluding one concerned with questions of inheritance by a child orphaned before he or she has reached the age of discretion. Reflecting on this saying in the context of the primordial covenant of the *Yawm Alastu*, however, it might also be suggested that

this saying of Muhammad opens a path towards inter-faith understanding. Each one of us—whatever our present faith commitment or community—was taken by God from the loins of the children of Adam and given a fundamental choice: to accept God or to reject God. Is it too optimistic of me to suggest that what unites not only Jews, Christians and Muslims but all of humanity seeking the meaning of existence is that all of us, obscurely but somehow realistically, have entered into existence or continue to enter into existence responding to the Lordship of God with an enthusiastic, indeed a joyful “Yes, we have born witness”?

III. Amen: Concluding Reflection

As many here present who have known me for a while will realize, I have lived for twenty-six years in Africa, principally in Nigeria and Ghana. Had I not worked mainly in universities, secondary schools and other English-speaking settings, I might have learned more of local languages than I did. But I still remember something of two West African languages: Yoruba, spoken in southwestern Nigeria by about 30 million people, and Fante (*Mfantisi*), a dialect of the Akan language that is spoken by half of Ghana’s twenty-three million citizens. Great missionary linguists of the nineteenth century, indigenous clergy like Samuel Ajayi Crowther and David Asante as well as expatriates like Johann Gottlieb Christaller, helped to create the Christian religious vocabulary of the Yoruba and the Akan.⁴⁹

There are many insights into the Scriptures that I have gained from the translation work of these pioneers and their successors. One relevant to my subject this evening can be found in the words chosen to translate the Hebrew and Greek words for faith. In neither language were the translators able to communicate verbally the mutuality of faith

between a faithful God and the faithful people with whom God enters into covenant. But the words for faith in Yoruba and Fante both capture something of the unique openness of human faith, its essential reciprocity with a transcendent Partner in covenant.

The Yoruba word for faith is *ìgbàgbó* made up of the words *gbà* and *gbó*, ‘taking’ and ‘hearing.’ The cognitive bias of that translation—‘taking what one hears’—is complemented by the mutuality implied between the divine Giver of covenant and the human recipient. The Fante word for faith, less cognitive than the Yoruba, is *gyèdzi*, derived from *gyè* and *dzi*, ‘taking’ and ‘eating.’ But in each case, whether through hearing or eating, the faithful are thought to appropriate, to take into themselves the Self-disclosure, the Self-gift of God.⁵⁰

The philosopher Martin Buber famously wrote that “the primary word *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being.”⁵¹ Faith is the ultimate form of *I-Thou* in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. The *I* of God discloses the Selfhood of the Holy One to the *Thou* of the human being, establishing a bond that exceeds all our human imagining, a covenant. Likewise, the *I* of the human being responds to the *Thou* of a Self-disclosing God, a God who offers the possibility of covenant. God speaks the divine *Amen* to you and to me in covenant, enabling us to speak our *Amen* to God in return.

Can we Jews, Christians and Muslims acknowledge our common heritage of covenant with and fidelity to God, and God’s covenant with and fidelity to us, despite our radical differences? To the possibility of such acknowledgement I hope to devote my tenure in the McGinley Chair, seeking common ground on which we Jews and Christians and Muslims can recognize each other as men and women of faith in the Holy One.

’Ămên. Amēn. Āmīn.

NOTES

¹ The principal books to which I refer are Smith's *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, repr., Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998: the 1998 edition adds the subtitle *The Difference Between Them*), in many ways the summation of two decades of Smith's study of this subject, and Dulles' *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), also the result of many years of exploring the relationship between divine Self-disclosure or revelation and the human reception of that Self-disclosure in faith. Dulles and Smith were aware of each other's writings on this subject and engaged at least once in public discussion on this subject when Dulles, in 1982, offered in Smith's presence a largely laudatory but somewhat critical evaluation of Smith's just published book, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London: Macmillan and Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981; repr., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). The unpublished text of this critique and Smith's subsequent letter of reply are to be found in the archives of Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., at Fordham University.

² *Dynamics of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 1. This book was originally published by Harper & Row in 1957.

³ "There is ambiguity in Tillich's usage as to whether the phraseology intends concern with what is in fact ultimate—namely, God—or with what particular persons rightly or wrongly actually concern themselves with surpassingly" (*Faith and Belief*, 230, n. 45).

⁴ *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1962, repr., New York: Mentor Books, 1964).

⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 64.

⁶ *Faith and Belief*, 120. See also *Belief and History*, 65. Both refer to *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Jess Stein (New York: Random House, 1966), s.v.

⁷ Despite two revisions, the English translation of *Einführung in das Christentum* (1968) of Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) often uses the term 'belief' where it actually means 'faith.' See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, translated in 1969 by J. R. Foster for Burns and Oates, Ltd. (London), twice revised in 1990 and 2004 for Ignatius Press (San Francisco), *passim*, and still in need of a better translation.

⁸ Smith more than once expresses his dislike for the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and theologians of mission under Barth's influence. In his popular work, *The Faith of Other Men* (New York: New American Library, 1965), Smith singles out the "neo-orthodox

trainer of missionaries in Basel,” Emanuel Kellerhals, for particular criticism. Kellerhals had written of Islam that, like other “foreign religions,” it is a “human attempt to win God for oneself, . . . to catch Him and confine Him on the plane of one’s own spiritual life, . . . and for oneself to hold Him fast” (Smith’s own translation of lines from Kellerhals’ *Der Islam: seine Geschichte, seine Lehre, sein Wesen*, 2nd ed. [Basel and Stuttgart: Basler Missionsbuchhandlung, 1956], 15-16). Writing about the post-Barthian ‘Death of God’ and ‘secular Christianity’ theologians of forty or more years ago, Smith remarked sardonically in *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967) that these thinkers “remind one, for all the world, as they lash about within Christendom, of the evangelistic missionary of more orthodox type who turned up in India and China in the nineteenth century, and feeling quite sure that his own Christian vision was the right one, and that the gods of the superstitious natives were at best idols and at worst demons, affirmed his own faith in terms of the falsity, and the destruction, of theirs” (31). Shortly after this passage he also notes that “those of us who sat out the Barthian fashion, preferring sobriety to its inebriating élan, have lived to see its apparent collapse” (33).

⁹ Smith’s radical emphasis on the personal, even individual experience of faith dramatically demonstrates the influence exerted on Smith by the theologian of personalism who was his professor at Westminster College at the University of Cambridge, Herbert H. Farmer. Through Farmer Smith was also influenced by that theologian’s own mentor, John Oman. Furthermore, the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, also a great proponent of personalist thought, greatly influenced Smith’s thought. Smith, however, never actually studied directly with either Macmurray or Oman. On these teachers and influences on Smith, see Kuk-Won Bae, *Homo Fidei: A Critical Understanding of Faith in the Writings of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Its Implications for the Study of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 15-18.

¹⁰ *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 172.

¹¹ Lonergan distinguished between faith and belief and maintained that such a distinction “secured a basis both for ecumenical encounter and for an encounter between all religions with a basis in religious experience.” He further wrote that “beliefs do differ, but behind this difference there is a deeper unity. For beliefs result from judgments of value, and the judgments of value relevant for religious belief come from faith, the eye of religious love, an eye that can discern God’s self-disclosures” (*Method in Theology* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1972], 119). But Lonergan did insist on the closeness of faith and the “truths of faith” (*Method*, 336), doctrinally formulated beliefs. Lonergan noted that “assent to such doctrines is the assent of faith, and that assent is regarded by religious people as firmer than any other” (*Method*, 349).

¹² *Assurance*, 274, for both quotations.

¹³ *Ibid.* In a 1971 book Dulles had explicated this definition at greater length, in the process comparing his opinions to those of Blondel and Tillich:

Faith may be viewed as a wholehearted acceptance of something that comes upon one with the strength of revelation—something that proves capable of giving meaning and purpose to a man's total existence. Faith, so conceived, can be broken down into three main elements. First, it implies a firm conviction regarding what is supremely important—that which Maurice Blondel called “the one thing necessary” and which Paul Tillich called “the object of infinite concern.” Secondly, faith implies dedication or commitment. The man of faith, to the extent that he really deserves to be so called, is prepared to make sacrifices for what he believes in—even to pay the ultimate price of life itself. Unless a man has something he is ready to die for, he is not really a man of faith. Thirdly, faith gives a man access to something on which he can totally rely and hence provides a basic trust, confidence, and optimism. A person may be of the opinion that the world is falling apart and that the future of history is utterly bleak, but he can still be a man of faith if he is convinced that there is a benign power above the world and beyond history that can give salvation, if need be, by restoring the dead to life. Thus the three principal elements of faith, as I understand it, are conviction, commitment, and trust (*The Survival of Dogma* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], 17-18).

¹⁴ The biblical archaeologist, George Mendenhall detailed the striking similarities that exist between covenant formularies in the Hebrew Bible and the international suzerainty treaties known from inscriptions dating from the second millennium B.C.E. See his two-part article “Faith and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Middle East,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 18:2 (May 1954) and 18:3 (September 1954).

¹⁵ I am indebted to Richard Clifford, S.J., for these insights into neo-Assyrian treaties.

¹⁶ In the text as quoted the rabbis count twelve attributes, but they tend to take out of context the word “remitting” (*wě-naqêh*) as a thirteenth attribute, ignoring the “not” (*lô’*) that follows in verse 7b. See *The JPS Torah Commentary: The Traditional Hebrew text with the new JPS Translation Commentary* by Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia/New York/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5751/1991), 216.

¹⁷ I am using the translation of the Jewish Publication Society, *Hebrew-English TANAKH* (Philadelphia: JPS, 5759/1999).

¹⁸ These words in Hebrew have also been rendered as “abundant in goodness and truth” in the King James Version (1611), “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” in the Revised Standard Version (1952), “abounding in steadfast love and fidelity” in the New Revised Standard Version (1989), “ever faithful and true” in the Revised English Bible (1976) and “rich in kindness and fidelity” in the New American Bible (1970 for the Hebrew scriptures).

¹⁹ Thus Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967; repr., Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 1975), 55.

²⁰ John's Gospel echoes this phrase when it asserts that the Word made Flesh reflects the Father's glory as an only Son, "full of grace and truth" (in the Greek, *plērēs charitos kai alētheias*). See PHEME PERKINS, "The Gospel According to John," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* [henceforth, *NJBC*] eds. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 951b (Section 61:25).

²¹ See Moshe Weinfeld, "What Makes the Ten Commandments Different?" *Bible Review* 7, no. 2 (April 1991), 35-41, available on line.

²² The word *'emet* derives from this root.

²³ Thus the JPS translation; the NRSV translates it as follows: "And he [Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

²⁴ Here I use the translation of the NRSV, one that is consistent with a translation considered possible according to the footnotes of the JPS rendering. In the main text JPS reads the Hebrew as an anacolouthon: "If you will not believe, for you cannot be trusted . . .," but in the footnote also suggests that the second part of that sentence can be translated as "surely, you shall not be established" (859). The biblical theologian Gerhard von Rad has commented that this passage in Isaiah is a recurrence of a so-called 'holy war' motif from older portions of the Hebrew Bible: "This saying on faith seems to some extent to strike a solitary note in Isaiah, and this would suggest that it did not belong to any tradition. But in fact the very opposite is true; for it is precisely at this point that Isaiah is particularly clearly restoring an old tradition to use . . . Isaiah gave fresh currency to the concept of the holy wars in which Jahweh both delivered his people and at the same time demanded faith from them" (*Old Testament Theology*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker [New York: Harper & Row, 1965], vol. 2, 159-160).

²⁵ Israel Abrahams, Jacob Haberman and Charles Manekin, "Belief," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA/Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007), 3:290-294, available on line.

²⁶ Dulles in *Assurance*, 3, reports that the noun *pistis* occurs 243 times in the New Testament and forms of the verb *pisteuein* also 243 times. Dulles examines in a brief scope all the usages of these words in the New Testament; in the interest of brevity I will examine only a few key passages.

²⁷ For Jeremiah in the seventh century B.C.E. this passage probably meant a hope for a renewal of the Mosaic or even the Abrahamic covenant for both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms in the era of Josiah (640-609 B.C.E.).

²⁸ In the Synoptic Gospels, according to Dulles, "the term 'faith' is often used absolutely, without any object being mentioned. God is the implied object . . . Jesus appears in the Synoptic Gospels as the awakener or catalyst of faith . . . Except in the undoubtedly

secondary passage, Matthew 18:6, the Synoptic sayings (as contrasted with the Johannine) never present Jesus as explicitly calling for faith in himself” (*Assurance*, 11).

²⁹ My own translation, as all New Testament passages quoted will be.

³⁰ The interiority of this new covenant is clearly symbolized in Mark’s account of the way Jesus not only healed but forgave the sins of a paralyzed man in Capernaum. When friends of the paralytic had managed to get the man into the presence of Jesus by opening the roof of the crowded house where Jesus was preaching, and lowering the man on his mat into his presence, Mark tells us that “Jesus saw their faith”(Mark 2:5). Looking at the paralytic, Jesus at first ignored his physical plight and concentrated instead on the man’s inner being: “Your sins are dismissed” (Mark 2:6), Jesus said. Hostile onlookers silently questioned the right of Jesus to assume the divine prerogative of forgiving sins. Jesus “sensed in his spirit” what they had not expressed openly, demonstrating his power to forgive sins by also healing the man of his paralysis. The New Testament’s concept of a new covenant of divine forgiveness established in the inner being and inscribed on human hearts lies just beneath the surface of this miracle story.

³¹ This usage occurs thirteen times in Mark, thirty-one times in Matthew and six times in Luke. See Felix Just, S.J., ““Amen, Amen sayings in the Fourth Gospel,” *Catholic.resources.org*, last revised by the author February 19, 2007.

³² This usage occurs twenty-five times in John’s Gospel. See Just, n.31 above.

³³ “Jesus claimed to know directly, intuitively, and without the usual organs that mediate authority, what the will of God was in any given situation—a claim summed up in his solemn affirmation ‘Amen, I say to you’. This form of speech (‘Amen’ not as a response but as an introduction to a new statement) was characteristic of Jesus and does not seem to have been common before his time—though it was imitated by the Gospel tradition and the evangelists . . .” Thus John P. Meier, “Jesus,” in *NJBC*, 1321b (Section 78:22.) See also John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 367-369.

³⁴ Galatians 2:16, 2:20, 3:22; Romans 3:22, 26; Philippians 3:9.

³⁵ Few modern translators and commentators on Paul admit the possibility of this phrase being a subjective genitive (“the faith/fidelity of Jesus Christ”) rather than an objective genitive (“faith in Jesus Christ”). For modern advocates of the subjective genitive sense, see George Howard, “On the ‘Faith of Christ,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 60 (1967): 459-465, and Luke Timothy Johnson, “Rom 3:21-26 and the Faith of Jesus,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982): 77-90; for a strong contrary view see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., “Letter to the Galatians,” *NJBC*, 785a (Section 47:19).

³⁶ Forms of the verb *pisteuein* in John can occur (a) with *eis* and the accusative, meaning quite literally “to put faith into,” (b) with the dative (an indirect object), meaning “to put

faith in,” (c) with a dependent clause introduced by *hoti* meaning “to have faith that,” and (d) with no object at all, direct or indirect, simply meaning to “keep faith.” See *Assurance*, 14.

³⁷ This usage of ‘Amen’ hints at the poetic account of creation in the Book of Proverbs: where Wisdom is said to have been with God as “a confidant” (JPS translation) or “master worker” (in Hebrew, *’amûn*: Proverbs 8:30) before anything else came to be. See *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Revised Edition*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), notes to Revelation 3:14 and Proverbs 8:30.

³⁸ I am indebted to the article “Covenant” of Gerhard Böwering, S.J., in the on-line edition of *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān* ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001) vol. 1, for illuminating insights on this topic. Böwering also notes the possibility that a third word for covenant appears in the Qur’ān, one possibly cognate with the Hebrew word *bērît*: *barā’a*. This word only occurs twice in the Qur’ān, but in the first instance, Qur’ān 9:1, it is sometimes thought to provide this Sura (usually called *Sūrat al-tawba*) with an alternative title, *Sūrat al-barā’a*. Marmaduke Muhammad Pickthall (in *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur’ān*, first published in 1930, but my edition emanates from Beirut: Dar al-Kitab Allubnani, 1971) translates the first verse of this Sura as “Freedom from obligation [*barā’atun*] (is proclaimed) from Allāh and His messenger towards those of the idolaters with whom you [pl.] made a treaty [*āhadtumma*].” M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (in *The Qur’an: A New Translation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004]) renders it as follows: “A release from God and His Messenger from the treaty you [believers] made with the idolaters [is announced].” If anything, this usage of *barā’atun* suggests the opposite of a covenant, the unbinding of those previously bound. The second occurrence (Qur’ān 54:43) is part of a warning given to Muhammad with regard to the pagan Meccans who rejected Muhammad’s message, not unlike the contemporaries of Lot and those who persecuted Moses in ancient Egypt: “Are your disbelievers better than those, or have ye some immunity [*barā’atun*] in the scriptures?” (Pickthall); “Are you disbelievers any better than these? Were you given an exemption in the scripture?” (Abdel Haleem).

³⁹ Jane I. Smith, “Faith,” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, vol. 2 (on-line edition: see n. 38.)

⁴⁰ Variations on the active verb *āmana* occur in the Qur’ān 518 times and the active participle, often used as a substantive, *mu’min* (“faithful”)—singular and plural, masculine and feminine—occurs in the Qur’ān 230 times. See Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur’an* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1983), s.vv.

⁴¹ The number thirteen is reached by only counting once each occurrence of *Allāh* and *al-’azīz* in these two verses.

⁴² No translation of the Qur’ān or of any other scriptural source can adequately reproduce the effect of the original. This and other Quranic passages cited are my own rendering in

English, made after consulting other English translations made by Muslims, most notably those of Pickthall and Abdel Haleem earlier cited (n. 38).

⁴³ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 1044a.

⁴⁴ J. Pedersen, "Amīn," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition [=EI 2]* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 1: 436b.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961), 109.

⁴⁶ The first *your* in this passage is singular and refers to Muhammad; the second *your* is plural and refers to humanity.

⁴⁷ *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 24.

⁴⁸ As quoted in Duncan Black Macdonald, "Fitīra," *EI 2*, 2: 931b-932a (1965).

⁴⁹ See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 200-201 (on the work of Crowther) and 216-219 (on Christaller and Asante).

⁵⁰ More accurately it should be said that the word *gbó* in Yoruba and the word *dzi* in Fante cover a range of meanings that includes, most obviously, 'hearing' and 'eating,' respectively, but which also include other forms of internalization like 'sensing' or 'understanding.'

⁵¹ *I and Thou*, 2nd edition, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 3.

Amen

Response by Rabbi Daniel F. Polish

Allow me, please, first a personal word. It is a great honor to be sharing this moment of remarkable accomplishment with my friend, Father Pat Ryan. It does carry me back to the days when both of us had the honor of sitting at the feet of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. To be here with him as ascends this distinguished Chair in Religion and Society is an honor I doubt either of us could have envisioned that lifetime ago. I thank Pat for including me in this inaugural exercise and I thank Fordham University for its hospitality.

I have been asked to make a commentary on what is a remarkable and significant paper. To rush to the bottom line, I cannot help but feel, as you must, that we were privileged, indeed, to be present at the first articulation of such a profound and important contribution to the understanding of religion, a subject to the implications of which I shall return. It is no small thing that this conviction is being given tangible demonstration by the fact that the inaugural lecture of this chair at this great Catholic institution includes responses from representatives of the Jewish and Muslim traditions. One cannot imagine such a thing happening even the last time this chair was filled.

As it happens the role of commentator is an ancient and honorable one. Indeed the way Jews read our sacred scripture is not actually direct and unmediated, as is sometimes intimated, but rather, refracted through the lens of commentary. Nothing could be further from *sola scriptura*. Jews read our foundational text as explicated through the interpretations of our classical commentators, *halacha* ('law'), and *aggada* ('narrative') elaboration. Indeed it has been suggested that significant portions of the New Testament

itself are essentially commentaries on Hebrew Scriptures very much in a Jewish mode. So I present myself as a commentator to Pat's dispensation with a significant pedigree.

To turn to the essential matter, what have we learned from Father Ryan this evening? It seems to me he has presented nothing less than a phenomenology of faith much as Rudolf Otto presented a phenomenology of the concept 'Holy.' In pursuing the meaning of this fundamental concept, he has reflected on the ways it is articulated in the three Abrahamic traditions. But he has done a brave and essential thing in identifying it as meaning, at its root, the same thing within each of them, namely the awareness of living in reciprocal relationship with G-d. This perspective has profound implications to which I shall return at the conclusion of these remarks.

Given the theme, my task becomes to reflect on the particular way the phenomenon of faith is expressed, and lived, in the Jewish tradition. As you might expect, Jewish tradition has a lot to say about faith expressed in its own idiom. I quite agree with Pat that Jewish faith must not be understood in terms of creedal affirmations or linear systematic formulations of belief. As an aside, I would go so far as to venture the opinion that that mode of expression of faith does not characterize Islam either, or the various expressions of the Hindu or Buddhist traditions. This suggests that faith understood in creedal terms is, among what we call the 'world religions,' a modality that is uniquely characteristic of the Christian tradition. While a Christian assessment of Jewish faith might involve the assertion that Judaism is 'creedally weak,' the reciprocal evaluation of the Christian tradition could be that it is 'creedally intense.' This is a subject which has been discussed exhaustively in Buber's *Two Types of Faith*.¹ Jewish religious understanding seems, as a

result, to be much more comfortable with ambiguities, and even internal inconsistencies, than the more creedally rigorous Christian tradition.

This lack of creedal focus in the Jewish tradition has its roots, I believe, in the Bible itself. Granting the importance of the ‘thirteen attributes of mercy’ which Pat discussed, what is striking about Hebrew Scriptures is how radically little they have to say about G-d in G-d’s own self. It is of no small significance that the earliest chapters of Genesis, for example, tell us nothing about G-d prior to the act of creation. If, as many translations of the first chapter of Genesis currently render the opening words of the Bible, the text begins with that moment “when G-d began to create the heavens and the earth”, it is not insignificant that it tells us nothing of what or where G-d was occupied prior to the moment that creation was initiated. Which is to say we are told nothing of G-d independent of G-d’s interaction with creation. As the Biblical account progresses, it is of profound import that scripture tells us nothing about G-d except when G-d is interacting with human beings. This is in radical contradistinction from the religious texts of the various cultures among which the first hearers of scripture lived and by whom they were so clearly influenced.

To put the matter in its most simplistic terms, one could ask, ‘what was G-d doing when G-d was not interacting with us?’ Scripture offers no answer. Indeed the question virtually leaps out at us as we consider the words of Exodus 3:9, “now behold the cries of the children of Israel have come unto me; moreover I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.” Which forces on any sensitive reader of the text the question, ‘where, then, was G-d during the four hundred years this calamity was inflicted on the children of G-d’s covenant?’ Later commentators seek to explore this issue and offer a

wide variety of interpretations and explanations. But they differ markedly among themselves precisely because, on this subject, scripture is absolutely silent. This silence, I submit, is not an anomaly in scripture, but profoundly characteristic of its refusal to assert anything about G-d outside of G-d's interactions with G-d's creatures.

This resolute resistance to creedal formulation is reinforced in scripture by the fact that the G-d of the Hebrews was, in terms that we would employ today—but they did not—invisible. It is not accidental that the Temple in Jerusalem was completely devoid of any physical representation of the G-d who was worshipped there. Or that the very attempt to make any kind of physical representation of the deity was proscribed in the Ten Commandments and then decried when it was prospectively violated in the episode of the golden calf—which is echoed later in the rebellion of Rehoboam as recounted in I Kings 12:25ff.

I would suggest that the non-discursive nature of the G-d of the Bible is epitomized in the elusiveness of the very name of that G-d. When Moses summons the courage in Exodus 3:13 to inquire, “what is Your name,” G-d responds with a phrase that eludes coherent translation, “*ehyeh asher ehyeh*” -- “I am who I am” or “I am what I will be” or “I am where I will be”. It is simply untranslatable. And in what I believe is another refraction of this incident, G-d responds to Moses' question with a name which is itself unpronounceable. Even later generations were forbidden to pronounce the name even if they could, with the exception of the High Priest when the Temple was standing who alone could pronounce it only once a year in one single place, the Holy of Holies, well out of hearing of the rest of the people. And then, after Moses is finally given access to that unpronounceable name, G-d goes on to assert that that, of course, was not the name by

which G-d had been known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and then further instructs Moses to tell the Israelite people whom he was to lead that he had been sent by G-d as “the G-d of your fathers”; and still further when he spoke to the Pharaoh to refer to G-d as “the G-d of the Hebrews.” Just what, then, is the name of G-d? All of which seems to point us toward the fundamental human incapacity to name/know the G-d who is at the center of the Biblical tradition.

That same resistance to rendering explicit the nature and character of G-d continued to characterize Jewish religious life. The one central tenet of Jewish faith came to be the words of Deuteronomy 6:4 which have come to be called the *Shma*: “Hear O Israel the Lord our G-d, the Lord is one.” Jews assert G-d’s oneness, but creedally remain essentially reticent about saying much more. Jews came to see themselves as literally willing to die for this affirmation, a subject to which we will return shortly, but would not append further affirmations to it.

To return to the commentative tradition which I mentioned earlier. In Genesis 12 we read of what is essentially the beginning of the covenantal relationship between G-d and Abraham. In Genesis it appears that this relationship begins with G-d’s initiative: “Go forth, from your land, from your ancestral place and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” The rabbis wonder what made Abraham so responsive to G-d’s summons. They conjecture about what happened between chapters 11 and 12. And they offer a *Midrash*, a narrative elaboration. In this telling Abraham began, like all of his neighbors, as an animist. He worshipped the sun, then the moon, then the planets, mighty trees, etc. Then suddenly it struck him that none of these could be the creator of heaven and earth. Rather, there was One who created them all. And it was in this fashion that Abraham became aware

of G-d's presence in the universe and was thus prepared when that one G-d summoned him to go forth. Does this story have official, 'creedal,' standing? Clearly not. And yet, significantly, the vast majority of Jews are familiar with it. So much so that many of them assume it is included in the Torah itself, thus conferring upon it what we can call semi-official standing. In the mind of any Jew familiar with the texts of tradition, and within the canon of sacred literature, these two stories are allowed to stand side by side. This is not only representative of 'creedal' inconsistency; it highlights two very different models of faith within the Jewish tradition. For what is significant about this rabbinic rendition of the moment of the inception of Jewish faith is that it does not begin, as the Genesis account does, with G-d's initiative; but rather with the seeker reaching out for the divine. It is that very same polarity that I hear represented in the title of two books by the 20th century American Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel: *G-d in Search of Man* and *Man's Quest for G-d*. This openness to very different approaches to faith is not without relevance for our appreciation of the meaning of that phenomenon in the Jewish tradition.

This is not to suggest that attempts to articulate a formal creed have been wholly absent within the Jewish tradition. At various times learned men would compose statements of Jewish belief. But the salient fact is that none of these statements of faith achieved official status or even widespread acceptance. Indeed, it seems not unfair to conjecture that these attempts were, themselves, made under the influence of the Christian environment in which they were created. Foremost among these efforts are the 'thirteen articles of faith' composed by Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). Maimonides' articles of faith come closest to representing a refutation of all I have said in the foregoing about the non-creedal nature of Jewish tradition. In these 13 articles Maimonides affirms belief in such principles as the

existence, eternity, incorporeality, and eternity of G-d. This formulation may currently be found in most Orthodox prayer books. In the fifteenth century it was recast in poetic form, and this poem, called the *Yigdal*, is similarly included in the prayer book. So on the basis of this one might assume that there is such a thing as an official formulation of Jewish faith. Yet it is significant that for most of the centuries after their formulation, Maimonides' thirteen articles were vigorously repudiated by other leading thinkers and effectively ignored by the Jewish community at large. Perhaps the most striking repudiation of the project represented by the thirteen articles comes, paradoxically enough, from Maimonides himself. In his more philosophical text, the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides assumes a stance that we would call apophatic, insisting that no positive statement can be made about G-d. In a perspective that would be influential on Aquinas, Maimonides instructs that the only way we can speak of G-d is through the *via negativa*. Indeed he goes so far as to argue that we cannot even say 'G-d is one' but must content ourselves with the assertion that G-d is not many.

If the credal minimalism of Bible is externalized in the emptiness of its sacred space and in the ambiguity about the very name of G-d, that same tendency has continued on into post-Biblical Judaism. There Jewish houses of worship continue to be devoid of any representation of the deity (as is also the case in Islam). Like their Biblical forebears, Jews display great delicacy in verbal references to the deity, avoiding even pronouncing the euphemism for the euphemism for the name that G-d revealed to Moses in Exodus 6. The rabbis preferred to refer to G-d as *HaMakom* ('the Place') and said that this particular euphemism implied that G-d is the world's place, but the world is not G-d's place.

Strikingly, I would suggest that we see evidence of this same non-creedal posture reflected in the prayer with which the traditional liturgy has Jews conclude every worship service. Called the *Kaddish*, this prayer is a doxology, consisting of elaborate expressions of praise and exaltation. Yet in the very midst of all the glorification of G-d, we find the assertion that G-d is “beyond all the prayers, songs and adorations that we can offer in this world”. It is as if the liturgy itself wants to send us home from the service with the admonition that we should not imagine that in all the hours of prayer we have spent, we have exhausted all that could be said about G-d, let alone approximated any full understanding of G-d.

The non-creedal nature of Jewish religion finds expression in the words of two more contemporary theologians. In a semi-fictional vignette, Martin Buber has a representative figure state:

What you mean by the name of God is something above all human grasp and comprehension....²

Abraham Joshua Heschel, regarded as a traditionalist, writes:

God cannot be distilled to a well-defined idea. All concepts fade when applied to His essence. To the pious man knowledge of G-d is not a thought within His grasp, but a form of thinking in which he tries to comprehend all reality.³

And yet, if Jewish religion is, in the main, non-creedal, it should not be imagined that Jewish faith is some kind of sterile deism. On the contrary, Jewish religious life is, as Father Ryan asserted, based on a sense of reciprocal relationship. This relationship is traditionally expressed in terms of Covenant with its mutual responsibilities on both sides. This is not the occasion to wrestle with the complicated issue of chosenness and G-d’s implied obligation to protect the people and seat it in its land, a concept which is stated

explicitly in the Bible and remains an integral part of subsequent Jewish understanding. It is the human side of this relationship which is properly discussed under the rubric 'faith'.

In the first place, as Father Ryan has already stated, this finds expression in the collectivity. It is the people as a whole which is the second party in the covenant. This is reflected in the fact that the vast majority of Jewish prayers are written in the plural, such as the opening of the first of the central prayers of any service, "Blessed are You O Lord, our G-d and G-d of our fathers". In affirming the covenant, the Jew attests both to his or her faith in G-d and to his or her awareness of belonging to the covenant people. In the liturgy for *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement), even the confession of sins is done communally and in the plural: "for the sin which we have sinned against You by..." This communal vision is expressed very powerfully even in the formula with which Jews are instructed to offer condolences to the recently bereaved, which asserts, "may *HaMakom* comfort you along with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

But it would be a mistake to assume that because of this sense of shared participation in the Covenant there is no intensely personal component in the Jewish idea of faith. In addition to seeing the Biblical narrative as the account of the collective historical experience of the people, Jews also find in it the intensely personal engagement with G-d of all the Biblical personages: our fathers and mothers, Moses, the prophets and others. The Biblical text is also read to imply that such a powerful personal relationship can be ours.

Indeed, the Book of Pslams is redolent with the personal dimension of faith and this is what makes that text so beloved. Some of the Psalms are devoted to the experience of the collective history or collective calamity or threat; the real power of the majority of the Psalms is the manner in which they give voice to individual persons expressing their

engagement with G-d. The Psalms are written in the singula: “My G-d, My G-d, why have you forsaken me?” They express the individual’s plea to G-d for protection, or they express gratitude for G-d’s beneficence or bounty.

The Psalms also express one of the most significant components of faith both for Biblical understanding and subsequent Jewish faith. One of the most commonly used words in the Book of Psalms is the word *betach* (trust). Seventy-nine times in 150 Psalms the psalmist gives voice to trust in G-d. Almost always it is voiced in terms of the individual experience:

In G-d do I trust, I will not be afraid;
What can flesh do unto me? ⁴

For Thou art my hope;
O Lord G-d, my trust from my youth.
Upon Thee have I stayed from birth;
Thou art He that took me out of my mother’s womb;
My praise is continually of Thee.⁵

When Pope John Paul II visited Israel, he invoked Psalm 31, whose verses include the affirmation,

But as for me, I have trusted in Thee,
O Lord; I have said, “Thou art my G-d” ⁶

The sense of personal confidence finds expression throughout the Psalms. We find an abundance of images such as, “My flesh and my heart fail; But G-d is the rock of my heart and my protection forever.” (Psalm 73:26), or “Thou hast enlarged my steps under me, and my feet have not slipped” (Psalm 18:37). Their number could be multiplied vastly.

This same intensely personal quality has carried over to the fabric of Jewish spiritual life. It is reflected in so much of the Jewish liturgical tradition; two examples which will be cited here. Echoing the personalism of Psalms are the words of the prayer

whose recitation is mandated as the very first prayer the Jew recites in the morning—indeed, which is the very first action Jews perform in the day:

I acknowledge before You, O King who lives and endures forever
That You have restored my souls within me out of mercy
Great is your *emuna*/faithfulness to me
My G-d the soul which You have implanted within me
Is a pure one
You have created it. You have fashioned it
You have breathed it into me
You preserve it within me....
The whole time that the soul is within me
I will praise You
O Lord my G-d and G-d of my fathers....

Similarly reflecting an intimate personal connection are the words from Psalms that are included in the liturgy of every worship service:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord,
My rock and my redeemer.

Perhaps the most intense expression of the personal component of Jewish faith was the Chasidic movement which emerged among Eastern European Jews and quickly became the dominant mode of Jewish religious life of that community. Indeed, it has been suggested that it was the very personalism of Chasidism which caused it to triumph over the more arid intellectualism of the theretofore dominant religious modes. Chasidim were given to referring to G-d lovingly in such terms as *Tatte* ('Father') or *Tattele*, an endearing form of that word. It is that intimate relation of the Chasidim with their G-d which is caricatured in the Broadway play, *Fiddler on the Roof*. It may be showbiz, but it is a close representation of that form of faith. Two representative selections from the writings of Chasidic masters will stand for many. An account is given of Shneur Zalman of Ladi (d. 1813), the founder of the Lubavitch movement:

Shneur Zalman interrupted his prayers and said: “I do not want Your paradise. I do not want Your coming world. I want You, and You only”⁷

Another of the great Chasidic teachers, his contemporary, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (d. 1809), wrote a remarkable song which goes, in part:

Where I wander – You!
Where I ponder – You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened – You!
When I am saddened – You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
Sky is You! Earth is You!
You above! You below!
In every trend, ant every end,
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!⁸

This personalist dimension of Jewish piety exists side by side with the sense of faith deriving from the collective participation in the Covenant. Both are authentic strands of the Jewish fabric of faith. This personal relationship is more than an intellectual stance; it has an emotional component. For Jews, no less than for Christians, the relationship with G-d is fairly characterized as love, love which expresses itself in ways which may seem unrecognizable to Christians. As Father Ryan has noted, what Christians call ‘law’ has a very different valence for Jews. No doubt, for Christians, Paul’s depiction of *halacha* makes it appear a burden and an impediment to any real relationship with G-d. For Jews, those very actions represent an expression of devotion and love. In the Jewish tradition, fulfillment of the *mitzvot* (Commandments) does not replace a relationship. Rather it testifies to one’s awareness of living in that relationship.

A few representative selections from the liturgy attest to the fact that Jewish tradition does not see a disjunction between ‘law’ and ‘love.’ Rather it sees these elements as two sides of the same coin. Every worship service includes the recitation of words from Deuteronomy 6, words affirming G-d’s unity, which Jews know by the name the *Shma*. Immediately following the *Shma* the liturgy includes the words that follow it in Deuteronomy. In the liturgy it has come to be called the *V’ahavt’* (“you shall love”). This selection begins with the injunction, “you shall love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might”. The prayer proceeds to delineate a series of actions which the rabbis translate into specific halachic actions such as the wearing of *t’fillin*, or affixing a *mezuzah* to one’s doorpost. It concludes with the assertion, “that you may remember, and do all My commandments and be holy unto your G-d”.

Love and law are similarly conjoined in the prayer that immediately precedes the *Shma*. In this case there are different prayers for morning and evening services. Both bear names that testify to the love component of our relationship with G-d. The morning version is called *Ahava Rabba* (“with abundant love”). It states, “With abundant love have You loved us, O Lord our G-d.... Put it into our hearts to understand, and discern, to attend to, to learn and to teach, to observe and to do, all the words taught in Your Torah in love. Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah and let our hearts cleave to Your commandments....” The evening version is even more explicit. It is called *Ahavat Olam* (“with everlasting love”). It deserves to be cited in full as attestation to the synonymy of law and love in Jewish tradition:

With everlasting love have You loved the house of Israel, Your people. Torah and commandments, statutes and ordinances have You taught us. Therefore, O Lord our G-d. when we lie down and when we rise up, we will meditate on Your statutes. We will rejoice in the words of Your Torah and Your commandments for ever. For they

are our life and the length of our days, and we will reflect on them day and night. O may You never take Your love from us. Blessed are You, O Lord, who loves Your people Israel.

In this way, in every service, the great affirmation of G-d's oneness is bracketed with prayers that conjoin the idea of love with the fulfillment of G-d's commandments. Jewish faith is clearly not constituted of law, as opposed to love. Rather law is the emblem of the love that is at the heart of Jewish faith.

At the core of Father Ryan's phenomenology of faith is the idea of reciprocity. And that quality is abundantly present in the manifestation of faith within the Jewish tradition. What is most striking in this regard is the notion that the attributes that are ascribed to G-d are also regarded as appropriate aspirations for those who would be faithful to G-d. This reciprocity is attested to both in the Bible and in post-Biblical Judaism. In the Bible it is stated most explicitly in Leviticus 19: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your G-d am holy." By the same token, all the qualities of G-d articulated in Psalms are similarly mandated for the worshippers of G-d. G-d is, and human beings are summoned to be: *chasid* (faithful), *tzadik* (just), *rachum* (merciful). The highest qualities of G-d are to be reciprocated in human behavior. Quoting Heschel once again:

Now, G-d is invisible. But you can't live without G-d. So G-d created a reminder, an image. What is the meaning of man? To be a reminder of G-d.... You look at man and you are reminded of G-d....As G-d is compassionate, let man be compassionate. As G-d strives for meaning and justice, let man strive for meaning and justice.⁹

Perhaps the most remarkable expression of this reciprocity involves even the very oneness of G-d that is the very ground affirmation of Jewish faith. Yet even in regard to that quality, human beings are involved in a reciprocal relationship. Jews are called on *l'yached et Shmo* (to unify G-d's name.) By their very faithfulness to G-d, Jews make G-d

one. In the late Middle Ages this phrase took on the specific meaning of offering one's life in what in other traditions is called martyrdom. When people sacrifice their life for G-d, their act serves to bring unity to G-d's very name. *Kabbalah*, the mystical strand of the Jewish tradition, offers an even more radical image of this reciprocity. In the Kabbalistic cosmogony, the creation of the universe was brought about by the shattering of G-d's essential unity. Sparks of the divine became embedded in the material husks of all that exists. The challenge for the pious is to release those sparks from the matter that imprisons them. *Tikkun Olam* (the perfection of the world) involves the action of humans literally resulting in the reunification of G-d. It is human effort, in this construct, that makes G-d one.

Perhaps the most audacious aspect of the Jewish model of faith is the notion, present in the Jewish rendition of reciprocity, that G-d and human beings are literally partners. Such an assertion is not found in the Bible itself. It enters the Jewish thought universe with the rabbis and has colored the way in which the rabbis, and those who follow them, read the Bible. It has become a constitutive part of Jewish faith. Paradoxically, it was a Catholic president of the United States who most perfectly captured this fundamental Jewish value when John F. Kennedy stated that, "here on earth, G-d's work must truly be our own." The idea has its roots firmly planted in ancient Jewish soil.

A consistent thread runs through rabbinic thought that affirms that G-d created the world but left it incomplete. G-d's purposes for the world need to be fulfilled by the actions of G-d's human creatures. Before a meal, Jews recite the prayer that states, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our G-d who brings forth bread from the earth". The rabbis point out that

G-d created wheat. But it is dependent on human beings to harvest it, grind it into wheat, and bake it before G-d can be praised for “bringing forth bread from the earth”. G-d created flax and wool. But it is dependent on human beings to harvest it, prepare it, turn it into fabric and weave clothes. (numerous sources). Similarly:

The tree does not produce fruit if it is not fertilized, weeded and plowed [by the farmer] ...the tree that produces fruit cannot live but dies if it is not given water...¹⁰

Indeed, one line of rabbinic teaching goes even further: G-d intentionally left imperfections in G-d’s creation. For what purpose? In order that humans might be able to do their part to make the world whole. Following this thread of Jewish thought, faith extends to the perception of ourselves as partners with G-d in the fulfillment of G-d’s design for creation.

And so, faith in the Jewish tradition does not express itself in creedal formulation. But it is hardly a matter of insignificance to the Jewish soul. Rather it entails a sense of intense relatedness to G-d, both in terms of membership in a covenant people and in the most personal and intimate manner. That faith becomes the template of the Jew’s entire life, shaping every aspect of his or her life. It is the faith of Jews that directs their way in the world and challenges them to the partnership through which the wounded world can be made whole.

In closing, let me circle back to where we began. I must share my own sense of the great significance of Father Ryan’s remarks. In the dialogue or triologue we have tended to speak about history or about traditions in the sense that Smith uses the term. We seem to scrupulously avoid what is at the core of our respective religious lives: faith. Pat suggests that when we meet, in the fullest sense of the word, as people of faith, we meet in a commonality that transcends the confines of the historic realities that have so often divided

us in the most painful way, these traditions which enrich us and provide the vehicles by which we express our faith; but, at the same time, they also set us apart from one another. In recognizing the commonality of our experience of faith, we may come to recognize how we are joined in the most profound way. And so I echo Father Ryan in the hope that we come to see that most fundamental commonality highlighted among us as we come together.

Amen and Amen.

NOTES

¹ Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1951).

² Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1952), 7

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1951), 108

⁴ Psalm 56:5

⁵ Psalm 71:5-6

⁶ Psalm 31:15

⁷ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim Early Masters* (New York, Schocken Books, 1947), 267

⁸ *Ibid*, 212

⁹ Susannah Heschel, ed., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 401f.

¹⁰ *Midrash Shmuel*, chapter 4

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.