

## **“The Missionary Who Wasn’t”: The Centenary of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) \***

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**T**he 21st of July this past summer marked the centenary of the birth of Wilfred Cantwell Smith,<sup>1</sup> a significant pioneering Canadian Islamic scholar. A pathfinder in the field of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, always the controversialist, affirmed that there was no such thing as religion. An interpreter of Christianity, he stated that Paul the apostle must be wrong.<sup>2</sup> He was a fascinating man.

It is only recently that the study of Islam, the religion of a billion and a half human beings, has been given its rightful place. For too long, in a world riven by religious conflict, Islam has been known through caricature, half-truth, misrepresentation, distortion, and misunderstanding. Cantwell Smith devoted his life to responding to this need for accurate characterization. A genial academic, appreciated by his students for his modesty, charm, and approachability, he was the first full-time professor of Islamic studies in three major universities: McGill, Dalhousie, and Harvard. Cantwell Smith, born a Presbyterian, nurtured as a child in a Presbyterian congregation, and sent out as a Presbyterian missionary, to the end of his life declared himself a Presbyterian (although latterly a minister in good standing in the United Church of Canada). So, it is appropriate that the Canadian Society of Presbyterian History mark this anniversary by honouring one who claimed to be one of our own both by nationality and denomination.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, son of Victor Arnold Smith and Sarah Cory Cantwell, was born in Toronto and raised in Knox Presbyterian Church. Seven years before his birth, the congregation, the oldest Presbyterian church in Toronto, had relocated from its downtown property at Queen and Bay streets to an uptown site at Spadina and Harbord. However, the original property (glebe, land, and sanctuary) could never be sold, according to the terms of the gift from Jesse Ketchum, the first minister’s father-in-law. Ketchum was a canny Buffalo tanner who had bought that land during the War of 1812 at fire sale prices. A trust was set up in his name, and income — the amount to be renegotiated every 21 years — provided funds for the congregation. That amount increased considerably after Knox Church relocated and the site was leased by the Robert Simpson Company, a large department store.

With the arrival of American Henry Martyn Parsons in 1879, the congregation became more like a frontier revival camp meeting. It also became a centre for a new method of interpreting the Bible, popularized by the Plymouth Brethren teacher J. N. Darby, called “dispensationalism.” Under Parsons’s successor, A. B. Winchester, an editor of the 1909 *Scofield Reference Bible*, it propagated an interpretation of the Bible which often focused on prophecy and end-time speculation. On Winchester’s departure in 1922 to become a minister *extra muros* (without walls) for a wide-ranging North American conference ministry, J. G. Inkster was called as successor. Inkster, who had his own demons, would be Cantwell Smith’s minister as he grew up, his preaching and teaching of Christianity shaped by dispensationalism. As a community, Knox Church sometimes struggled to exemplify Christian charity and forbearance.

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<sup>1</sup> For comparison of Smith with other recent interpreters of Islam, see James A. Tebbe, “Kenneth Cragg in Perspective: A Comparison with Temple Gairdner and Wilfred Cantwell Smith,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26, no. 1 (January 2002): 16–21.

<sup>2</sup> W. C. Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981), 35.

While the congregation militantly stated that it was “contending earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints,” it was hardly a traditional Reformed faith propagated from its pulpit. Dispensationalism compromised the historical integrity and unity of biblical revelation, stating that the Old Testament, so important in interfaith and intercultural dialogue, did not apply to “the church age” — Christians were now in a new dispensation. Grace, another foundational Christian principle, was compromised by a semi-Pelagian approach, one of the chief appeals of Christianity to a Muslim. Because of its preoccupation with “Daniel propheta” (reflected in a creative stained-glass window in the new Knox Church) and the prophet’s “70 weeks” leading to the Second Coming of Christ (always *before* the millennium), dispensational eschatology and that of Islam met in a bizarre coming together — Dabiq or Armageddon, take your choice, IS/Daesh or Christian. Jesus’s so-called “imminent return” was a key factor in motivating missionary commitment: the return of Jesus would be hastened as the Gospel was proclaimed to all nations (Matthew 24:14).

Knox Church became a hub for no less than seven “faith missions,” some supported by its Ketchum Trust income. It was also three blocks away from the Toronto Bible College, one of the few non-dispensational Bible schools in North America and noted for the number of graduates it sent to the mission field. The Presbyterianism of Cantwell Smith’s childhood — barely recognizable from its historic Reformed identity — proved profoundly influential, both in action and reaction, as Cantwell Smith’s thinking developed. In spite of two years of post-graduate research at a Cambridge divinity college and ordination by the Church of North India, Cantwell Smith never had a theological education. His approach to Christianity was sociological.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith and his brother, Arnold Cantwell Smith (older by a year and a half), had a privileged childhood. Their father was West Indian, born into the Grenada plantocracy. They grew up on prestigious Dunvegan Road in Lower Forest Hill and both attended the exclusive private Upper Canada College nearby. Wilfred supplemented his education there with courses at Grenoble and Madrid. Both brothers then went on to the University of Toronto. Arnold, a Rhodes Scholar, had a distinguished diplomatic career as a colleague of Lester Pearson, spending a decade as the first Commonwealth Secretary (1965–1975). He predeceased his brother by seven years. Their father, Victor, was immensely (and understandably) proud of his two gifted sons and did everything he could to promote their careers.

As a loyal churchgoer, Wilfred, on entering university, was encouraged to join the Student Christian Movement (SCM). His membership there would shape the subsequent direction of his life. SCM had grown out of the old Student Volunteer Movement but by the 1930s had taken a marked leftward turn, emphasizing in a time of desperate economic dislocation social action rather than missionary recruitment.<sup>3</sup> It was at SCM that he met his future wife, Muriel Mackenzie Struthers, the daughter of Canadian Presbyterian medical missionaries and a pre-med student at the university. Her father was Dr. Ernest Black Struthers<sup>4</sup> of Galt (now Cambridge), Ontario. Originally sent out by the China Customs Union as a medical civil servant, he joined the Honan Mission of the Canadian Presbyterian Church, teaming up with Jonathan Goforth, one of Knox Church’s venerated missionaries. Struthers went on to Shandong, where he became head of the medical faculty at Qilu University, a bastion of liberal Protestant missionary service.<sup>5</sup> Muriel Struthers had all the

<sup>3</sup> See my *C. Stacey Woods and the Evangelical Rediscovery of the University* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 122.

<sup>4</sup> See Gerald H. Choa, “*Heal the Sick*” Was Their Motto: *The Protestant Medical Missionaries in China* (Shanghai: Chinese University Press, 1990), 132.

<sup>5</sup> See my chapter in *China’s Reforming Churches*, ed. Bruce P. Baugus (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation, 2014). Also, 赵曰北, 《历史光影中的华北神学院》(香港: 中国国际文化出版社, 2015年

humanitarian instincts of her remarkable father and throughout her long life (she died in 2010) was a champion of left-wing causes. In the 1930s, SCM, faced with fascist thuggery and dire economic privation and dislocation, became a recruiting ground for the Communist Party of Canada. Wilfred and Muriel were soon seen as a couple at SCM, and she had a profound influence on him. The patchy<sup>6</sup> University of Toronto SCM archives from that period show Wilfred, as president, providing some leadership in Bible study, supplementing the steady SCM diet of social activism, hosting a retreat at his home on Dunvegan Road the same month he graduated in 1938. SCM redirected the energies of many devout church collegians in the 1930s.

That autumn, Smith went to Cambridge University's Westminster College, the theological seminary of the Presbyterian Church of England, where his Marxism proved a liability. There he wrote a thesis that critiqued the British Raj in India, and the examiners felt that because of his rigid Marxism, it did not meet their rigorous intellectual standards. By the time he returned to Toronto, the Second World War had broken out.

While in England Cantwell Smith had been approached by William L. Paton,<sup>7</sup> originally of the Student Volunteer Movement/SCM, secretary of the National Christian Council of India in the 1920s, and now the influential secretary of the International Missionary Council. "Dr. Paton," it was reported<sup>8</sup> by W. A. Armstrong, the PCC's Foreign Missions secretary, "was most enthusiastic about this young man. He says he is doubtful if there is anyone anywhere so brilliant and with such fine qualifications for this work." The work that Paton had in mind, discussed in an earlier visit to Toronto with Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and United Church representatives on the Foreign Missions Council, was to "cooperate in work among the Mohammedans in India."<sup>9</sup>

Cantwell Smith wanted to go to India with his bride, intending to sail from San Francisco to Calcutta (because of U-boats on the Atlantic); however, he needed a loan for a year for travel (his Fellowship would support the couple once they arrived). Strong representations about this need from Muriel and Wilfred (and later his father, Victor) were made to Armstrong in his office, a frequent occurrence before Victor moved out of the city, something that must have challenged Armstrong's pastoral patience. "They are both unassuming," wrote Paton of the young couple. "No flamboyant play of the training which they have already had and the success which has attended their scholastic efforts." Paton went on to say that if the PCC dithered, they would go to the United Church in seeking the \$890 required.

In a further letter, dated 28 August 1941, Paton weighed the options for Smith's placement. Cantwell Smith was regarded as a valuable asset who seemed to have so much potential for the evangelization of Muslims in India. There was the Forman Christian College in Lahore, Punjab, whose principal, Surendra Kumar Datta, had an outstanding reputation, particularly in reaching Hindus. "One great advantage of a job in the Forman College is that it will bring Smith into touch with a considerable number of young Muslims and the standing of the College is such that it would help rather than hinder his general contacts with Muslim leaders."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Henry Martyn School of Islamic Studies in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, was founded in 1930 by a consortium of American and British mission boards with "the twofold purpose of making a close study of present-day movements among Muslims in India for the preparation of Christian literature more adequate to the needs of the day in this

<sup>6</sup> They were received in 1979 and have only recently been partially catalogued.

<sup>7</sup> William L. Paton (1886-1943), described as an "Ecumenist, secretary, International Missionary Council. Regrouped Cambridge SCM 1910 after the IVF [Inter-Varsity Fellowship] CICCUC [Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union] defected because of liberalism."

<sup>8</sup> W. A. Armstrong to A. M. Hill [of Verdun, QC], 20 July 1949. PCC Archives.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Paton to Priest, 22 August 1941. PCC Archives.

field.”<sup>11</sup> American Presbyterian Dwight Donaldson had recently been transferred to the school from Iran and there was much hope of a new and more reflective appeal to Islam. Smith’s appointment remained fluid throughout his six years in India as he travelled between the two schools but lived in Lahore, where his wife attended medical school.

At Knox Church there was euphoria because at last something was being done to reach the unresponsive Muslim world, particularly in India where the PCC had worked mainly in tribal areas. On 31 March 1941, Knox Session voted the entire salary of \$2,500 for the Smiths from the Jesse Ketchum Trust. A fulsome letter by the new incumbent at Knox, T. Christie Innes, dated 3 April 1941, stated that “[t]his whole project must be fraught with rich divine blessing, and we shall constantly seek to maintain not only financial support but deep spiritual and personal interest in this vitally important and happily conceived project of the Canadian churches.”<sup>12</sup> Armstrong’s response was an appeal for Knox to get behind the General Assembly’s budget which they had been reluctant to do; Armstrong concluded, “That the one who is heading up this new task is a gifted and consecrated son of one of your own families makes this action of your Session uniquely fitting.”<sup>13</sup>

As the Smiths settled into their quarters in Forman’s Ewing Hall on Roberts Road in the autumn of 1941, W. A. Cameron continued to send encouraging words, but now the question of ordination in the PCC had been raised by Wilfred’s father in conversation with Cameron. Cameron explained the process of being ordained as a PCC clergyman but said, “I am sure that some adjustment in the matter could be made. It might be that the General Assembly would have to be consulted.”<sup>14</sup> On inquiry Smith discovered that the United Church of North India (UCNI), a 1924 amalgamation of various Protestant denominations working in the country, would be willing to ordain him with the possibility of retaining his Knox membership as well as that of his local congregation, Naulakha, in Lahore.<sup>15</sup>

There was a one problem: the UCNI statement of faith that Smith would be required to sign. He responded: “It is clear that this embodies a more or less modified version of the early Reformation Church. To me it seems insincere not to recognise that was generally put forward to the modern church, especially in America. I am personally acquainted with a large number of ministers and theological professors, to say nothing of church members whose faith the formal confession does not adequately describe.” In the letter he indicated that the Canadian SCM statement of faith was one he and his wife could sign. It spoke of “the conviction that in Jesus Christ are found the supreme revelation of God and the means to a full realization of life.”

Smith’s response sent Armstrong to Knox College, where he met with W. W. Bryden, Systematic Theology professor, who carefully examined the UCNI Confession “and was very much pleased by it.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, he had concerns about the Student Christian Movement statement. What it said no Christian could take exception to; however, in ordination, the Church puts its imprint on a person, in what one might call “an official capacity . . . the statement of faith of the SCM is not adequate. More should be known of a man’s theological point of view.”<sup>17</sup> Smith had earlier stated that he could not treat confessional subscription as “a mere formality. This seems to be an inadequate practice. Surely a fundamental issue is at stake and I hesitate to treat it as of little importance.” Something had penetrated about transparency in doctrinal subscription (perhaps at Knox

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<sup>11</sup> An undated sheet titled “Henry Martyn School of Islamic Studies, Landour,” circa summer 1940. PCC Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Christie Innes to W. A. Cameron, 3 April 1941. PCC Archives.

<sup>13</sup> W. A. Cameron to T. Christie Innes, 4 April 1941. PCC Archives.

<sup>14</sup> W. A. Cameron to W. C. Smith, 22 September 1941. PCC Archives.

<sup>15</sup> W. C. Smith to W. A. Cameron, 12 January 1942. PCC Archives.

<sup>16</sup> W. A. Cameron to W. C. Smith, 21 May 1942. PCC Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Church?) and with integrity, he refused to sign a statement, as many did, "with mental reservations."

Victor Smith set up a time to meet with Armstrong who commended his son's honesty but went on to concede that "[y]ou can see that it poses certain difficulties."<sup>18</sup> Armstrong's response to Wilfred's 12 January letter had been delayed due to wartime postal challenges. In a follow-up in late July, Smith wrote an emotional four-page letter.<sup>19</sup> "The conception of the missionary task — or at least of our task — is to serve the people among whom we are working: in this case, the Muslims of India." He continued in language from his SCM days: "we have it amply illustrated by modern knowledge, by Hitler, by the U.S.S.R., that human nature is profoundly influenced for good or ill by the political, social, economic, and physiological set-up in which and through which it functions." He challenged Cameron to accept that in "many years of intensive study, reflection, and activity, there is little likelihood of a fundamental change in view."

Cantwell Smith's view of the missionary task was, to say the least, unusual: he and Muriel were lecturing on a local radio station on the achievements of the Soviet Union, he on "Religion in the U.S.S.R." and Muriel on "Health in the U.S.S.R." Smith is also credited with founding the Punjab Communist Party. His brother, posted to Estonia and Moscow at the time, would later provide a more realistic picture of Stalin and his gulags.

Meanwhile, as W. A. Cameron wrote H. B. Gordon, Ketchum Trust treasurer, "It is an honour to us as a church that one of our young men should have so commended himself by ability, scholarship and consecration of purpose to the difficult task of presenting the claims of Christ as Saviour and Lord to the Muslims that he has been so heartily accepted will be a particular pleasure in that he is one of your boys."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Smith had received wide acceptance in the Muslim community for his ability to sit and learn from them as he acquired their language. In November 1942, he was invited to attend the All-India Muslim Students' Federation Conference in Jullundur, Punjab, as the guest of the principal with whom he stayed, a Cambridge graduate. There, for the first time, he observed Muhammad Ali Jinnah, later founding father of Pakistan, who was chairman. "I was very pleased to attend," he wrote afterwards.<sup>21</sup>

His rejected Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, *Islam in Modern India*, was first published locally. At Forman, he lectured on Muslim history. In his October 1942 report, he stated, "I feel now that I have reached the point of actually getting across to them something worthwhile."<sup>22</sup> With his keen mind, his growing knowledge of Urdu, his lack of any sense of racial superiority as a colonial, and the theological removal of any desire to "convert" Muslims to Christ, he related to them naturally and identified with them. He was very popular with Muslims one on one as he was with all his students. His book, which appeared first in 1943 and went into four editions in the next three years, showed the development of his thinking as he searched for common ground between Islam and Christianity, a quest he would later abandon. His views on partition, as the process accelerated during his years in India, also showed development as he grew to accept the inevitable.

Four days before Christmas 1943, the relationship between Wilfred and Knox Church was abruptly terminated. The Trust Committee ended its support of the so-called "Mission to Muslims." The allocated funds were, instead, redirected in 1944 to a missionary to Formosa, George W. MacKay, a doughty theological warrior who had kept the Formosa field for the continuing Presbyterians in 1925 (the only one not taken by the United Church). Victor,

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<sup>18</sup> W. A. Cameron to Victor Smith, 27 March 1942. PCC Archives.

<sup>19</sup> W. C. Smith to W. A. Cameron, 25 July 1942. PCC Archives.

<sup>20</sup> W. A. Cameron to H. B. Gordon, 24 January 1940. PCC Archives.

<sup>21</sup> "Report from Wilfred Smith, November 1942." PCC Archives.

<sup>22</sup> "Report from W. C. Smith, Oct. 22, 1942." PCC Archives.

whose work with the Canadian government's Munitions and Supply department had transferred him to Hamilton (and later Ottawa), wrote an emotional letter to W. A. Cameron: "we are reminded that our Lord himself was rejected by the very synagogue which he had visited from boyhood from Sabbath to Sabbath, when they wanted to kill him, and the servant is not above his Lord."<sup>23</sup>

Cameron's superb pastoral skills went into overdrive as he recommended that Victor quietly leave Knox Church and not make the very public withdrawal he had threatened. "I know how deeply the action of this Committee will hurt Mrs. Smith and yourself with this background of your long connection with Knox Church," he wrote, "and the fact that your boys grew up within that congregation."<sup>24</sup>

Apparently, a letter had been sent to Wilfred from the trustees in October asking for his views on two matters: Holy Scripture and his understanding of Jesus as the only way to God. His answers were not regarded as satisfactory. Knox Church had been swept along when he was first appointed and had not done a proper interview. But the family was somewhat naïve to think that a man who self-identified as a "modernist" would ever be acceptable at Knox Church.

As Victor Smith predicted, there was some dissension about the decision not to continue his son's salary. A "W. C. Smith Committee" had been formed and prominent among its members was the name of Mrs. Inkster, who had become embittered and severed her links with Knox. Meanwhile, Christie Innes left the congregation to become the head of the American Tract Society in New York City.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith had one final perk as a Presbyterian minister and missionary. On his return to North America in 1946, he applied for accommodation at Princeton Seminary. The Payne apartments on Alexander Street had been endowed in the 1920s for Presbyterian foreign missionaries as a place to stay while on furlough. There, a block away from Princeton University, the Smiths, now with two small children, stayed until Smith finally completed his graduate studies, which enabled his appointment to McGill in 1949 as its first professor of Islamic Studies. At that time, with his ordination in the Church of Christ of North India recognized by the PCC, he was added to the appendix to the roll of Montreal Presbytery; however, his name was dropped without explanation in the 1962 *Acts and Proceedings*. His subsequent career, with its ideological twists and turns, took him to Dalhousie and Harvard universities and is beyond the scope of this paper.

On retirement in 1984 Smith returned to his native Toronto. At the end of his life he took up residence in Fellowship Towers, Yonge Street north of Davenport, where another resident, Griffin Poetry Prize winner, Margaret Avison, ironically a member of Knox Church, immortalized him in her poem "To Wilfred Cantwell Smith."<sup>25</sup> His funeral 16 years later took place in Bloor Street United Church (formerly Presbyterian), four blocks from Knox Church, conducted by his close friend N. Bruce McLeod, the maverick former moderator of the United Church, with a Presbyterian liturgy. Harvard asked the family at the time for his papers so that they could be archived at the university. Characteristically, Smith had had them all destroyed. He felt that his books and his work spoke for themselves.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Victor Smith to W. A. Cameron, 11 January 1944. PCC Archives.

<sup>24</sup> W. A. Cameron to Victor Smith, 14 January 1944. PCC Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Margaret Avison, "To Wilfred Cantwell Smith," *Concrete and Wild Carrot* (Toronto: Brick Books, 2002), 67-68. "Myopic, skeptical, sometimes distraught,/ slowly your readers see ourselves as foreign,/ trotting for safety through our little warren/ of walled ways. Now, perilously, we're out."

<sup>26</sup> Professor Brian Cantwell Smith [University of Toronto], in a phone discussion with the author, 21 April 2016.

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