The Basic Constituent

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FAITH AND BELIEF (Princeton, 1979) by Wilfred Cantwell Smith is a short book of less than two hundred pages, but documented in as many added ones of vastly erudite notes and references. After rereading it a few times in the past months, I feel certain that this admirable work may be counted on to influence the evaluation of religious phenomena in their fundamental relatedness to our humanness for many years to come. For the book addresses itself specifically to the vital questions: "What has faith to do with believing? What has it to do with being human?" It may well revolutionize priorities in religious studies and, at least as importantly, contribute to that more open, more enlightenedly human and generously macro-ecumenical approach, that is so desperately needed to offset the all-pervading nihilism of modern society.

Cantwell Smith, whose *The Meaning of Religion* (1962) was somewhat of an event, draws our attention to the fact that when we speak of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam as "religions," we are using a comparatively recent and moreover inadequate, even misleading reification, a mere abstraction, for what in reality, are ever-developing and waning communities of faith, and traditions which have been shaped by countless generations of men and women living lives of faith.

The phenomenology of religion, while gathering and studying religious data, has hardly considered these persons, whose involvement and commitment elevated systems of symbols to the religious level. Faith, the author holds, is a constituent of man *qua* man. The relationship between faith and belief is what this book succeeds in clarifying magnificently, in a style which at first may strike one as somewhat pedantic . . . until it discloses itself as being merely extraordinarily and punctiliously precise, and as responsible as its discourse in terms of historical data demands.

Faith is, for the author, the fundamental religious category, that human

propensity which throughout history and across the globe, has given rise to a prodigious variety of religious forms, yet has remained elusive, personal, both prior to and beyond the forms it has assumed.

Although we may by now have gathered considerable information about, and descriptions of, the various religious systems, we have not yet risen to the challenge of understanding the impulse behind them. We have simply reconstructed the overt data of religious life, have observed the observable. But to live religiously is not to live in the presence of certain symbols, but to be involved in these symbols with that total and existential response which affects not only one's relation to religious systems, but one's relation to oneself, to one's neighbor and to the cosmic Whole. Faith is that constituent of the human person which discerns meaning: in his own existence as well as in the order of the universe. Faith then is to "see the point" of being here at all. It is this involvement and commitment called faith, that bestows on religious phenomena their religious significance, for faith is that which relates us to the Transcendent.

It is this human constituent that has been expressed in, elicited, nurtured and shaped by, the religious traditions of the world. It cannot be defined, but to stake out the direction in which its locus may be found is the purpose of Cantwell Smith's study. To speak of faith as the fundamental religious category may make Christian and Islamic theologians demur. They may insist on positing God as the fundamental religious category. Even then they must admit that it is not God but the idea of God, that may be regarded as such; and if they should aver that God has entered human history and is active in it most significantly, it may be pointed out that He is active in it through and by the life of faith of concrete human persons.

However this may be, beliefs must certainly not be posited as the primary religious category. For beliefs are time- and culture-specific expressions, formulations of faith constantly changing in the worldwide range of history, whereas religious faith has remained, in all its variations, a constant. For it is not argued here that faith is everywhere "the same." On the contrary: for a Hindu, it is pointed out, more than one type of faith may be valid and this not only for different persons or groups in society, but even at different stages of a single person's lifetime. Often there are greater variations in faith to be found within one of the great traditions than between the traditions as such. Nevertheless, faith always reveals itself to be that quality of human living, that encompasses a view of, and an attitude to, Reality as having a transcendental dimension beyond the everyday empirical. The opposite of faith is not unbelief or disbelief, but unfaith or "that bleak inability to find either the world around one, or even one's own life meaningful, an absence of mutuality, in that one cannot respond

either to the universe or to one's neighbor knowing that one will be responded to; an almost total dependence on immediate events, coupled with the sense that immediate events cannot really or for long be depended on, a sense of lost-ness. . . ." Other current terms that cover this condition in its various aspects are: nihilism, alienation, loss of identity, uncommittedness, meaninglessness, existential vacuum. . . .

The confusion between faith and belief is to a great extent due to the change in meaning the word "belief" has undergone since the Renaissance and which the author traces in great detail. In short: "to believe" once meant "to hold dear." It is etymologically connected with *lief, love, to belove, to regard as lovable, to cherish.* Hence in reading a medieval religious text one is likely to misinterpret it, if one is not aware of this change in usage, and read in it what was never intended. A medieval manuscript, for instance, may urge Christians "not to set their belief" on worldly goods. "To set belief" means here: to set "one's heart" on worldly goods. "To believe in God" was not an option to either believe (in the modern sense) or not, in God's existence, for God was part of the furniture of the medieval mind, part of its pre-suppositional framework. "To believe in God" once meant indeed: "to set one's heart on God." It was the total commitment to God. In the modern context, however, the "existence" of God has become an uncertainty. To believe—in the modern sense of the word—in God is an option: one does or one does not. The meaning of the word "believe" shifted from the existential to the descriptive. It is characteristic that in the earlier period the verb occurs predominantly in the first person, as "I believe," expressing self-involvement. Later it more often refers to others as in: "What do Buddhists believe?" or "Some people still believe that the earth is flat." To believe has become "not to know," it implies at the very least a lack of certitude, an open neutrality as to the correctness or otherwise of what is believed, a concept by which one conveys that a view is held ideationally without a final decision having been reached as to its validity. In this sense "believing" has become the standard characterization for religious positions in the modern world. To say "I believe" no longer indicates a commitment, nor does it include the expectation that others will concur in one's doctrines, opinions or sentiments.

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No interpretation of faith is likely to be persuasive which is insensitive to the mundane elements as well as to the aberrations and pathology of religious involvement. Yet, neither can it ignore the capacity of faith to cause persons and groups to transcend the mundane, to become most authentically human, and

this—normally—in the context of human communities. The history of religion is not that of symbol-systems and belief-systems, but the as yet unwritten history of the depth or shallowness, richness or poverty, authenticity or insincerity, splendid wisdom or murderous folly, with which persons and societies have responded to the symbols around them.

In the Christian sphere the role of "belief" (in the modern sense) has been a major one. Assent to propositional doctrines often became the qualification for membership in the group. In other communities doctrine is negligible in importance compared with ritual, which for instance plays the main role in Shinto. A Shinto poem expresses it perfectly: "What it is that dwelleth here/I know not/yet my heart is full of awe/and the tears trickle down."

We are here at the opposite pole of the Christian emphasis on intellectual and moralistic concepts. But not only religious communities show widely varying beliefs that come and go, for so do science and philosophy. Yet here too faith in their ultimate ineffability persists. . . .

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In order to elucidate the universality of faith in relation to belief, the author examines Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian exemplifications. Perhaps the Buddhist one is not the most accomplished in this brilliant analytical sequence, although there is much in it that is highly quotable: "The recognition in relatively recent Western studies of its (Nirvana's) transcendent quality, and its ultimacy in the Buddhist scheme of things, has led to the recent suggestion that we were hasty and perhaps simply wrong in calling the Buddha's position atheist or even world-denying. No modern logical positivist or linguistic analyst has outdone him in insisting that human language is incapable of dealing with metaphysical reality. . . ." Professor Smith also stresses that the Dharma is not merely some system of Gautama's making, but that the Buddha's "Ancient Path" is far more than twenty-five hundred years old, for it is the Path trodden by the Buddhas of bygone kalpas, and that the Dharma does not owe its validity or authority to the fact that the Buddha was a wise and great man. On the contrary, Gautama became wise and great because he awoke to the Dharma's pre-existent Truth, recreated and revivified it.

That we live in the kind of universe where such Truth obtains, is the "good news" Gautama preached. To the Buddha what matters is neither one's theology, nor the ritual observances one performs, nor the caste one belongs to, nor one's intellectual or mystical feats, but whether one lives life rightly.

The author concludes:

> In theoretical terms it is a metaphysics of morality: that the only final truth is goodness, that a human life well lived reflects, exemplifies transcendent Reality. The point is not to transcend the world, but to live well within it. If you do live well within it, you will find that you have transcended it. . . .

The Buddhist does not *believe* this to be true, but *finds* it to be true and Buddhism is religious because through it men and women's lives were lived in what the Western world has traditionally called "the Presence of God." And it could be argued that those Westerners who use the term "God"—whether to affirm or deny it—would do well to include this quality of reality in their meaning for that term. The time surely has come, when they must incorporate these Buddhist insights into what they do or do not "believe". . . .

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In the Islamic example which follows, "belief in God" seems to be spectacularly central. But this is only so if we use the word belief in the modern, sceptical sense. For the Muslim does not "believe" (in the modern sense) in God. One can even say that the Qur'an is a belief system that does not believe in believing. For Islam, God is the pre-supposition, the Muslim cannot even conceive of the possibility that one might doubt the existence of God. In the Qur'an the concept "belief" as a religious activity does not occur, and what has been mistranslated as belief. should read "to have faith in": one's positive recognition and acceptance of the divine summons and one's commitment to its demands. God—not "believed in" but pre-supposed—has spoken His command and henceforth men are divided into those who obey and accept and those who reject or rebel against His command. The creed of the Muslim is therefore not an affirmation of "belief," but the explicit bearing of witness, the public announcement of one's affirmation of a personal and corporate commitment. In so far as "beliefs" (*zanna*) exist, they are rather opinions, usually wrong ones, or absurd and perverse notions. The outsider may think of the Qur'an in relation to Muhammad, the Muslim can only think of it as the word of God; it is not Muhammad's scripture but His. In sharp contrast to the anthropocentrism of the modern Westerner, Islam's view is radically theocentric and faith is the engagement with truth, in which mind and heart and act are integrated, in dynamic solidarity with the entire community. "Infidelity" (*kufr*) is the self-destructive refusal to participate in the truth, it is the lie in the soul (*takdhib*).

Only when propositions which at one time were unconscious are raised to the level of consciousness can the option of accepting or rejecting them arise. Sceptics, soon followed by religious persons, may then become aware of no longer accepting some erstwhile presuppositions. Objective evaluation of the symbol system now becomes possible. But although the symbol is human, what it points to is transcendent, and therefore the essential question remains as before: the response to the symbol.

It is not a new faith that is needed to overcome our existential vacuum, I understand Professor Smith to say, but a new notion of faith, helpful in interpreting man in relation to that transcendent dimension of Reality of which Michael Polanyi wrote in 1967: "The purpose of this essay is to reintroduce a concept which has served for two millenia as a guide to the understanding of nature and has been repudiated by the modern interpretations of science. *I am speaking of the concept of Reality. . . .*" A notion of faith, global enough to do justice to the multitude of diverse forms, in ritual, in doctrine, in art, in ethics through which faith has appeared among us, is now overdue, if we are to survive as humans.

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In Hindu society the analytical reflection and the complexity is so overt and accepted that one may say that there is a tendency to presume the validity of any religious position, intellectual or non-intellectual, until shown otherwise. The question of "belief" in the modern sense has never interested Hindu thinkers as a religious category. To see the universe as it really is, is for the Hindu not a matter of belief but of *jnana*, that direct higher knowing or insight into the Structure of Reality, that transcendental knowing, recognizing or insight—often analytical and critical, but never sceptical—which is not *a way* to salvation, but that *is* in itself salvation.

The important concept of *astikya* does not refer to what a Hindu "believes," nor to what he practices. For Hindu religious life, in contrast to that of Christians and Muslims, knows neither orthodoxy nor orthopraxis, it is legitimately diverse and pluralistic. What is here decisive is *astikya* as a positive attitude to tradition, whatever one may make of this tradition. . . . Faith then becomes *astikya-buddhi*, the affirmative attitude towards the awareness, the discernment of, the awakening to, the transcendent.

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I would consider writing a review of this highly concentrated, seminal work of historical and comparativist learning an impertinence on the part of a layman,

if it were not at the same time a personal act of gratitude to call attention to it. For Smith's clarification of the relationship between faith and belief confirms and transilluminates what—I was still a child—I learned experientially and empirically by being born in an agnostic family that lived on a tiny a-religious island of its own, as it were, in the ocean of Catholicism at the southernmost tip of Holland. It was a Catholicism that at the time was still monolithic, fundamentalist, ultra-traditionalist and politically as powerful as it was devious. Still, the very earth we lived on was drenched by almost two millennia of Catholic culture. The Romanesque cathedral of my hometown was built a thousand years ago on the remains of a Roman Jupiter temple, altar pieces by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, the high mysticism of Ruysbroeck and Thomas à Kempis, the play of Everyman, the organ preludes of César Franck, these were among the fruits of a regional culture, as profoundly Catholic as it was archetypally human. Solemn processions, colorful ritual, Gregorian chant, candle light, roadside shrines on crossroads, seemed to whisper coded messages, conveyed secret whisperings of some transcendent Reality, making the unseen almost seeable. Madonna and child, doleful crucifix on the cathedral wall, Christ in Glory on a tympanum gave first intimations—or were they reminders? —of life and death as mystery. Having no other symbol system at hand, these earliest intuitions of the transcendent found their focus in the Catholic symbols that surrounded me. While my schoolmates were being indoctrinated with the concepts and dogmatic constructs they had to learn by rote as part of their conditioning as "good Catholics," I, the outsider, could let these symbols[1] of the Sacred, in which I found surpassing beauty, truth and rightness, play freely in my mind, allowing them to decode themselves without constraint, beyond the realm of logos. These symbols of a Catholic culture provided me with the indispensible scaffolding for a life in which the awareness of both the transcendent dimension and the ontological interdependence of all existence was to become central. Later I would find, through Mahayana, the symbol system of my childhood transilluminated in all its grandeur, both intellectually and existentially. . . .

Is it mere self-deception to interpret my childhood fascination with Catholic symbols—I never devalued them, on the contrary!—as *astikya-buddhi*? Or was it closer to that other Hindu concept which although not quite translatable by "faith," *sraddha*, is that "which one sets one's heart on," without specifying too

[1] "The symbol is that appearance of the real which also includes the subject to whom it appears. Appearance is always for somebody, some consciousness" (R. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics*).

precisely *what* it is one puts one's heart on? For *sraddha* comes close to the involvement, the commitment, which lies at the root of the religious life, one's finding, or being found by, something to which one gives one's heart. In *astikya-buddhi*, that saying "yes" to a tradition, and in *sraddha*, these two Hindu concepts combined, I now seem to recognize what moved me in my childhood response to the Catholic symbolism around me, made it into an initiation into what for lack of a better, less contaminated word is spoken of as faith, while ignoring all dogmatic formulations and resisting all indoctrination with beliefs: I never became a Catholic. . . .

Without *sraddha* all sacrifices, donations, oblations, prayers remain vacuous, heartless. The opposite of *sraddha*, Professor Smith explains, is not disbelief but simply indifference, ego-diffusion, scattered concerns. "As a man's faith is, so is he," says the *Bhagavat Gita*.

The universe and man are so constituted that *sraddha* is the intrinsically appropriate orientation to what is true, right and real. To be gripped by the poignancy of myth, symbol, concept, or work of art, to be stirred by these to existential commitment, however labeled, is not a matter of either gullibility or belief, it is to be moved "to put one's heart into" what one has seen. What in the West we call "a leap of faith," is a person's leap from objective knowing to existential commitment, the taking up of the authentic religious life, which inevitably spills over into every form of involvement, every activity. Such singleminded commitment has become exceedingly rare and its absence is characteristic of the modern nihilism which pervades every aspect of our contemporary world.

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In the Christian example which follows, faith seems comparable with both the Hindu and Islamic mode of commitment. In this section Prof. Smith describes—based on Cyril of Jerusalem's lectures on the Sacraments—the rite of baptism in the early church, as a going down into the baptismal font, from which one emerged free, washed clean of the tyranny of worldly attachments, of the world of atomistic disorder. The baptisand had become a free man, had entered the world of light. He had formally renounced Satan and all his works. He had rejected "the system," the establishment, to range himself on the side of Christ. . . .

In the subsequent anointment he became in fact "a Christ," and in the eucharist he "partook" of the Christ, participated in the divine nature. This turnabout at the base transformed both inner and outer life by a commitment in which the question of "belief" in either God or Satan was not even inquired into. For both God and Satan were religio-cultural presuppositions, they were

the given. Nor was it a magic performance: the rite only worked provided "one put one's heart into it."

The Credo is cited as another example in which "belief" was originally not at issue. The word "Credo" derives from *cor*, *cordes* (heart), plus *do* (to place, to put, set or give). It too was a declaration of commitment, and only gradually did the Credo assume more doctrinal overtones. The classical creeds of the Church included no propositional statements. Credo therefore was related to *sraddha*: one set one's heart, one committed oneself in an act of faith. Space prohibits quoting Professor Smith's references to the attitude of Thomas Aquinas to the relationship between faith and belief, but the copious and fascinating documentation supplied, shows that for St. Thomas faith was "the capacity of the intellect to recognize the genuineness of the transcendent" and he judged that it may happen that the person of faith holds beliefs which, as products of the human imagination, are false, but that the faith involved in them is true.

Only in the nineteenth and early twentieth century did Catholic teaching begin to assert that "belief is the content of faith" and that this belief (in the modern sense of the word) is infallibly provided by the Teaching Church. The result was rather devastating, for the "object of faith" which used to be a person, God or Christ to whom one committed oneself, "through whom one had faith" became now . . . a doctrine, an idea, a theory. The mood of faith which traditionally involved one's relationship to absolutes, to realities of surpassing grandeur and surety, became a mood of belief, opening the doors to those uncertainties, those matters of questionable validity, which could not escape the modern mind for which belief had become a discredited notion, as "knowledge" is—after being so fashionable for many years—now beginning to be seen as an aberrant oversimplification, namely, as that particularly limited awareness of the natural world described by the natural sciences. Poetry and art, the moral life and everything of "value," was during this disconsolate period thought of, virtually by definition, as being in a realm which had nothing to do with "knowledge." Nineteenth century theology in its attempt to present belief as a basic religious category, more or less the equivalent—or even as having priority over—faith, may have contributed to the weakening of the Church's credibility. Theology and doctrine, being more central to it than to any other community on earth, made the yes/no, true/false answer to questions of "belief" into a veritable passport to "faith." Henceforth the Christian discussion was no longer likely to center on transcendental realities, on faith as man's relation to the transcendent, but on belief as man's relation to the conceptualizations, the doctrines which had once been the vital expressions of faith but had now become of

questionable validity as expressions of faith. The forced marriage between faith and belief was to end in divorce, and religious belief became often, instead of a stimulant, an obstacle to faith as a religious attitude towards existence.

Mark Twain's schoolboy put it wittily: "Faith is belief in what you know ain't so." In truth, however, faith is as central as belief is marginal. . . .

Faith is not subordinate, nor is it equivalent, to belief or to anything else mundane. To it all religious forms are at best secondary, as faith itself is secondary to, derivative from, and answerable to transcendent reality and truth. In the past, thinkers have rarely addressed themselves to faith in its global context, but the rise of unfaith now makes it possible to assess how much the faith-communities have in common, in contrast to the bleakness of modern nihilism, that loss, not of belief only but of faith. Nihilism is the "unfaith" of those for whom nothing is worthwhile, for whom life consists of a congeries of disparate items without coherence, for whom persons have become things and for whom not only God is dead, but all meaning, order and purpose. Faith may be differentiated in seeing the point of life and of the world in disparate modes. Nevertheless it stands in total opposition to un-faith in seeing life and the universe as indeed having a point—a cosmic point—and that man can be grasped by it, and his life transformed. Geographical isolation and the exclusivistic dogmatism of Christians and (non-Sufi) Moslems have been the chief obstacles to recognizing faith as such, until in recent times secularist scientism became its arch-enemy.

The classical humanist secular (in its positive sense) tradition, was a tradition of faith in which nobility, force, dignity, coherence and trust contrast sharply with the alienated, irreligious secularism of our day. The vital question is whether our society can be the exception to the rule that human beings have in every age and culture lived by faith, and yet survive. . . . If there is truth in Buddhism, it is not a Buddhist truth, but a truth in the universe to which Buddhism has called attention. Christians do not have a Christian truth-monopoly to propagate, but a truth that is consistently human. The opposite of Truth is not falsity, but ignorance.

One is not a human being and also a Buddhist, a Christian or a Jew; one is a human being by one's relation as Buddhist, Jew, Christian or whatever, to the Real, not excluding the transcendent dimension but emphatically including it. The secularist orthodoxy that human beings have only the non-transcendent in common, is fast developing into that infernal, if not terminal, Western tragedy: the radically dehumanized society.

To sum up: faith is not belief in a doctrine, not even belief in the truth as such, whatever it may be. It is assent to the truth in the dynamic and personal

sense of commitment to it, it is the religious attitude to existence itself, both individually and communally, in its this-sided transcendence. In drawing, however inadequately, attention to the main ideas set forth in *Faith and Belief* I am aware of having ignored, perhaps distorted aspects of its discourse in its unquestionable greatness. Cantwell Smith does not claim to have presented more than an incipient attempt, which he hopes theologians, scientists, and laymen of the various religious communities will complete, for it is "our common human involvement, increasingly shared and sharable and persistently crucial in the mystery of that manifest Reality, our involvement in which I have called faith."

Postscript

As I was correcting the typescript of the above article, a book arrived in the mail which I started to read and could not put down, and which I recommend highly to be read in conjunction with Cantwell Smith's *Faith and Belief*. It is Raimundo Panikkar's *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Crosscultural Studies* (New York, 1980), published by the Paulist Press.

Dr. Panikkar, Professor of Religious Studies at the Universities of California at Santa Barbara and Varanasi, is particularly well placed to play a key role in the task Cantwell Smith assigns to others, namely to penetrate into our common human involvement with the crucial, shared mystery of faith. For he is trained as a scientist (Ph.D. in Chemistry) and holds doctorates in Philosophy and Theology; but at least as important is, that through his mixed Hindu and Spanish parentage he stands literally on the boundary between East and West. In his thirty published books ("The Unknown Christ of Hinduism" was his doctoral dissertation at Lateran University, Rome, published in 1961) and his over 300 major academic articles in Theology, Hermeneutics and the History of Religion, he has laid the groundwork for a Christian theology that does full justice to the contributions the genius of the other world religions have to make to its enrichment.

A few years ago this Catholic priest, grounded in both Western and Eastern traditions, wrote after a long absence from Europe: "I left as a Christian, found myself as a Hindu and I returned a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian." It is a confession that may well express a trans-religious, multi-religious experience many of us each in our own way have shared. In the introduction to this book which is as erudite and original in approach as it is readable—Panikkar's style is stimulating, poetically alive and innovative—he recognizes the state of human emergency in which we are living, and which hardly allows us to entertain ourselves with bagatelles. But he concludes that precisely because

of our situation we are in desperate need of those insights into the deeper structures of reality which may enable us to go to the roots of the problems that beset us. He sees it as his own task to contribute to the "radical turn of the spirit indispensible for the survival of humanness."

The hours I have spent with this book, which it would be vain to attempt more than draw attention to, have been more than rewarding. It has been exhilarating to read in his meditations on the Buddha, statements like: ". . . if it exists, transcendence is so transcendent, that it surpasses both our thought and our own being, and thus also any attempt to name" . . . "to name the Absolute would (for the Buddha) be the greatest blasphemy."

Faith he defines in many ways, as "a human invariant," as "existential openness towards transcendence, or, if this seems to be loaded, more simply as existential openness, as a bottomless capacity to be filled without closing," and as ". . . something that frees us from inauthentic existence," and as ". . . unique, even if its conceptual translation and vital manifestations are multiple . . . ," "not a relation to an only transcendent 'God,' but the solidarity with the whole of Reality," as "that *x* in man which makes possible the 'recognition' of the foundation" about which "all terminology is just the concrete objectification of a cultural system." He speaks of faith also as "the ontological link relating man to the transcendent, not essentially tied to any fixed doctrine, but which, by making it depend on unalterable formulations would be treason against history." But above all, faith is for Panikkar "questioning, an ontological thirst that cannot be quenched, an anthropological desire that cannot be satisfied and that—if it could—would annihilate man by destroying his constitutive tension that thrusts him ever to the Absolute, whatever we call it."

These are just a few tidbits to whet the appetite for those provocative 500 pages of experiential and speculative exploration, committed to the uncovery of the crosscultural wellsprings of the "religious."