



This is a book about religious truth: about where men have found it in the past and where we may hope to find it today—or at least where it may be reasonable to look for it, and what kind of thing we should be looking for. The work is written by a world-renowned historian of religion, for whom the question of religious truth is utterly crucial. He brings to bear on the question a wide-ranging scholarly knowledge of Hindu, Buddhist, and especially Islamic forms as well as Christian. He has developed deep insight into the faith of other communities and rich appreciation of their history and the meaning of their symbols. His studies have led to the conviction that religious truth is indeed available to man, yet that truth does not lie in one religious system rather than another—truth and falsity in the religious realm are not the property of theological statements. Religious truth, he suggests, lies elsewhere: in the lives and hearts of persons. Creeds and theologies are not true or false in themselves so much as they may become

true, or may become false, as we respond to them. It is not the Qur'an that matters ultimately—nor the Bible—but what happens to the man who lives by it. One Christian may falsify his faith while another renders it true. These views are presented in essays of refreshing vividness and realism.

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M. Yamenedarya

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*Questions  
of  
Religious  
Truth*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Meaning and End of Religion*

*The Faith of Other Men*

*Islam in Modern History*

*Modern Islam in India*

*Wilfred Cantwell Smith*

QUESTIONS  
OF  
RELIGIOUS  
TRUTH

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## PREFACE

Religiously concerned men today face new questions, without knowing quite what they are.

Many who for a time felt the traditional religious affirmations to be false, are no longer sure that the matter is quite that simple. Many who all along felt that they were not false, are yet restless. Both groups have come to sense that the classical forms may have expressed a legitimate and serious, even valid, awareness, but no longer express it felicitously or even perhaps effectively. Venerable doctrines reflect a reality that one guesses may be or feels sure is still there while the doctrines somehow may not now reflect it. The sensitive man is left feeling that the traditional religious answers are to questions other than those in which he today is personally involved.

This series of lectures is an attempt to raise new sorts of question. It does so not in the thought that these are precisely the issues with which modern men are engaged. On the contrary, these are unwonted queries, provocatively strange. They are pressed here in the hope that by turning to novel issues and by treating old problems in novel ways, it may be possible to illuminate the area out of which the old questions once arose and out of which also the new will eventually be formulated. It is the task

## PREFACE

of the theologian to articulate in words the vision to which men of faith legitimately aspire. By probing in new directions, as here, it is hoped to contribute to that endeavour.

Because our first chapter treats the "death of God" movement, let it not be supposed that our concern is sensationalist or with ephemerals. Because our second chapter raises the question, Is the Qur'an the word of God? let no one imagine that this is a book about Islam. More accurately, let no one but a Muslim imagine that. It is a book about religious truth: about where men have found it in the past, and where conceivably we may hope to find it today, or at least where it may be reasonable to look for it, and what kind of thing it may be that we are looking for.

The material here presented was delivered first as the Taylor Lectures for 1963 at Yale Divinity School, except the opening chapter which is part of a Charles Strong Memorial Lecture delivered in the Australian universities in July 1966. The Islamic material was submitted also to a Muslim audience at the Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, in 1964, and chapters two to four to a partly Christian-missionary, partly Hindu audience in Jabalpur that same year under the auspices of the Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies. I am grateful to the Rev. Mr. Ian Douglas and the Board of the Jabalpur institute for their cordiality; to Principal Mujib and his colleagues for their unflinching interest (without Muslim as well as Christian involvement I would not venture to make public these ideas); to Mr. C. R. Badger and the other Strong Trustees for their

thoughtful arrangements and hospitality; and especially to Acting Dean Forman of Yale and his colleagues not only for acting as gracious hosts and for encouragement but also for their original invitation to make my first public appearance as a theologian.

In this published version the lecture form has, at the instance of the publishers, been thinly disguised ("last evening's talk" has become "the preceding chapter," and the like). Yet the fact that the last three chapters were conceived for an explicitly Christian audience and delivered before other religious groups has left its mark: I have been able to take certain matters for granted and to leave certain concepts unexplained, in the confidence that these religious groups would understand. To elaborate them now, or to expound the same positions in vocabulary more familiar or more persuasive to a public with other starting points, would have burdened these pages unduly and robbed the argument of whatever pithiness it may possess. Normally I strive to write in such a way that secularists as well as men of overt faith, and Buddhists as well as theists, may find the theses intelligible, even cogent. Any published "we" that refers to a community less than mankind, I usually find unsatisfactory. In the present case I trust that others may accord an interim tolerance while I attempt to make a point in a form that is specifically and explicitly theological. I find myself hoping that they may perhaps even have sympathy for the point, if not for the form. Yet having been invited, as a Christian, to speak before a Christian group, I have done so to the best of my ability.

W. C. S.



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I THE  
“DEATH  
OF  
GOD”?



## *The "Death of God"?*

Anyone who would give serious attention to the recent movement in the United States that has made quite a splash by calling itself a Christian atheism, must first face a few preliminary questions. Does it deserve serious consideration? Might one not better give heed to, let us say, the early Buddhist movement? It also has been called atheist, and for twenty-five hundred years now has provided men and women in the millions with a life, whatever their beliefs, of deep faith, of evident richness and transcendence, of conspicuously and rewardingly religious quality. It would seem not difficult to argue that, in comparison, this new movement not only is less tested but also is less disciplined, less rational, less powerful, less serene; certainly less lovely and less wise. Or should one rather consider the faith that for long some men have surely had in secular humanism, a movement with its prophets and its martyrs; and ponder what may be involved in such faith, and also nowadays in a possible loss of it?

Is there not a danger, in the "death of God" case, of succumbing to a trick of provocation? Even the protagonists of the movement, and certainly the rest of us, must guard against an exaggerated even if innocent attention to the spectacular as such, giving ear simply to the strident.

# II

IS  
THE  
QUR'AN  
THE  
WORD  
OF  
GOD?

## *Is the Qur'an the Word of God?*

That God speaks, or has spoken, to man has long been a joyous proclamation or quiet assumption of religious faith; more recently, however, it has seemed less clear what such a conviction might mean. I propose that we can illuminate this matter by asking, *Is the Qur'an the word of God?* This query, I suggest, is worth discussing, is a question that will repay thoughtful consideration for a moment.

By this I do not mean simply that a possible answer to it may be of some significance. Later on we shall spend a certain amount of time formulating some parts of an answer. I shall be presenting for reflection some arguments that may induce perhaps favorable consideration of that particular sort of reply. And I shall be propounding that in any case, any serviceable answer must be rather complex and subtle. Before we reach that stage, however, and whatever one may think of the particular road along which I shall suggest that an answer may be found, the question itself is interesting, and the types of answer that it usually gets. There is reward in pondering some of the matters that such a question involves in the modern world.

First of all, we must observe an arresting fact: that in the past, there have normally been two answers to this question—namely, “yes,” and “no.” Each of these answers

# III

CAN  
RELIGIONS  
BE  
TRUE  
OR  
FALSE?

## *Can Religions be True or False?*

Are religions true or false? is a question that might, at first blush, appear rhetorical. In grammar, a rhetorical question is one that "does not expect an answer": the question itself carries the punch, and conveys the meaning. To answer it would be otiose, an anticlimax. For the answer is supposed to be obvious, because generally agreed; while the question is what makes the point. On more careful reflection, one recognizes that in this particular case the matter is not quite so. As in the instance of our preceding chapter, so here it is rather the answers that have been rhetorical, as it were; making some emphatic point, while the question itself goes unexpressed. In this present realm, answers have been far from generally agreed: men have made striking points by affirming this or that, in vigorous clash one with another, while all have seemed to take for granted the legitimacy and innocence of the questions. "All religions are true," someone has said, feeling that he has said something wise and weighty. "All religions are false," opines another, confident that the dictum is dramatic and pungent. "This religion is true, others false," is a third conviction, of one who expects that some people may disagree perhaps with his verdict, but not that they will fail themselves to be

IV CHRISTIAN—  
NOUN,  
OR  
ADJECTIVE?

## *Christian—Noun, or Adjective?*

If someone comes up to me and asks if I am a Christian (as, for instance, in India the Census agents used to do), I find it easy to answer "yes," in a glib sort of way, and then turn back to getting on with my job. The question is easy, the answer is straightforward, and the matter is quickly settled.

If, on the other hand, someone asks me if I am Christian, the situation changes radically. This I find a searching question, and disquieting; one that undermines my complacency. Indeed, to ponder it is to be set all a-tremble. The question is not easy; nor is the answer straightforward. Obviously it is not a yes-or-no matter; the question ought rather to be, "How Christian are you?" I cannot answer by confidently laying claim to any large share of Christian-ness ("Oh, I am very Christian indeed, thank you very much") for that would be both arrogant, and false. Yet neither can I absolve myself by confessing that, alas, I am hardly Christian at all; for I may recognize how little Christian I really am and yet I am haunted by a powerful sense that I ought to be more Christian than that. A high answer is pretentious; a low answer is just not good enough. Something in between has the faults of both these. In fact, I just cannot answer the question at all.

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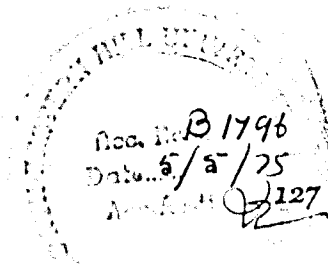
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