

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 (*bērit*), 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 worshiping 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-ḥesed we-’emet* ("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. *Ḥesed* 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-ḥesed 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 *ḥesed 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, *'ēmūnah*) occurs less frequently in the Hebrew Bible than forms of the verb with that tri-consonantal root (*'ālep-mēm-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-mēm-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 *ḥesed we-'ēmet* of God eliciting and even demanding from human beings, as individuals or as a community, the response of faith or fidelity. The word *'Āmēn*—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 *'Āmēn* 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-ḥashr*, 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-Fātiḥa*, 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 (*fiṭra*). A saying is attributed to Muḥammad that “every infant is born according to *fiṭra* (*‘alā-’l-fiṭra*); 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.

'*Âmên. Amên. 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 *’ēmet* 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, “Fiṭra,” *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.