



“The Masking God”: Engaging Roger Haight and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in Search of the Living God in the Ongoing Deadly Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study phenomenologically aims to reconsider the understandings and practices of religions in ongoing deadly Covid-19 pandemics. Religions and their naivety have become the pandemic within pandemic. Religions pretend to behave like God and the followers obey them uncritically and sometimes irrationally. This study argues that religions should become a window that through it the followers can experience the liberating presence of God who is characteristically pro-life and love. I argue whatever concept of truth religions have, life, and love must be the character of true faith in a true God. This study limitedly investigates global religious phenomena during the covid-19 pandemic all over the world and endeavors to give a theological appraisal based on the theology of Roger Haight and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. In conclusion, I argue, God is indeed present in human life but not transparently. God reveals God-self with a theo-philosophical mask. Thus, God is a masking God. Therefore, to understand God we should debunk the naïve understanding of religion and go beyond the religious phenomena to the absolute mysterious reality of God–The ‘Wholy Mysterious Other’.

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Introduction

This article is entitled “Theological Phenomenology of “The Masking God”: Engaging Roger Haight and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in Search of the Living God in the Ongoing deadly Covid-19 Pandemic”. In the current turbulent times, we see there is a need to reconsider the concept of God in the theological and religious phenomenological fields. God somehow is reified in religion. The danger is, religions then behave like God and lead their followers to obey them rather than bring or point the followers toward God. This study will start by generally investigating and interrogating the various naïve understandings and practices of religions. I will

put global religious phenomena as basic data to go deeper into what utterly happens in the current concept of God in various religions.

In comprehending the data, I will compare and combine phenomenological concepts of Gerard van der Leeuw and James Cook. Their theories are important, particularly the concept of *epoche*, to let the phenomena speak for themselves. After that, I will debunk and decolonize the concept of religions and God. I will go along with Smith and propose the inadequacy of religion. I argue that religion is not fully able to depict and define God. I insist that critical and rational reasons are significantly crucial in public religious life. To understand God, religiously, transcendental faith and scientific knowledge are two faces of an inseparable coin. Without both of these elements, religious life will go naïve and dangerous.

The thesis of this study is that God, as we know it, is a masking God. Augustine argues “*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*” which means, “if you comprehend (God), it isn’t God.”¹ Therefore this study will seek to answer these questions; how to discover a pro-life and live loving God amid various naïve and deadly religious understandings and practices. How to move beyond the phenomenon to the absolute religious reality and how to reconstruct a critical and rational interpretation of God by synthesizing Smith and Haight's theo-philosophical thoughts.

Global Pandemic of Covid-19 and Various Religious Phenomena

According to the World Health Organization website, since it first appeared in China at the end of 2020, covid-19 has become an international threat. In just a few months, the WHO on March 11, 2021, then declared covid-19 as a global pandemic. The number of victims has expanded to 202 million people infected and 4.2 million who died (August 9, 2021, based on the WHO official report). This incident has paralyzed various sectors of social life including economy, security, health, politics, social interaction, and religious life. However, some interesting phenomena are the findings of data that show religions with their rituals and teachings that trigger or catalyze the spread of this deadly virus. Some events that need to be analyzed include the massive spread of the virus in one ‘Christian’ sect in Daegu – South Korea. The Sincheonji sect has become the epicenter of the transmission of this virus. More than 5000 patients were traced to this religious site. The Korean government itself detained the leader of

¹ For further reading, Jean Grondin, "Augustine's 'Si comprehendis, non est Deus' – To what extent is God incomprehensible?" *Analecta Hermeneutica* [Online], Volume 9 (5 February 2018).

this religious organization on charges of reporting inaccurate data about the activities of this 'church' and the members to the government.² In the same report, it is also mentioned that the protestant church in Incheon - Gyesan Jeil Church - was blamed because its worship had become the center of transmission of the virus. A similar incident also occurred in Seoul, at a conservative evangelical church - Sarang Jeil Church - where 700 cases were found linked to the activities of this church.³ Generally, religious leaders responded by continuing to carry out religious activities in person, even though because of government force they eventually switch them to online worship.

The same thing happened in India. In the 'Kumbh Mela' religious ceremony or pitcher festival on the Ganges River, millions of people gather and perform ritual baths for the remission of sins despite the threat of the virus.⁴ The impact of this event is a catastrophic increase in the virus and even caused massive deaths in India. WHO data noted that on March 29, 2021, there were 513,885 confirmed cases and 3,071 deaths before the ritual in India but after that on May 3, the confirmed cases jump to 2,738,957 and 26,820 deaths and continues to increase.⁵ Reuters, on May 11, 2021, said about 4000 bodies were found floating in the Ganges River.⁶ The humans who previously lived and bathed there were now drifting lifeless.

In Indonesia, a similar phenomenon also occurs in both Christianity and Islam. In their research, Amos Sukamto and Panca Parulian stated that several Pentecostal churches in Indonesia initially insisted on rejecting online worship and persisted in doing in-person worship even in the midst of a pandemic.⁷ In the same research, they also mentioned that several mosques

² Min Joo Kim, "Churches have become South Korea's coronavirus battleground" in *The Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/churches-coronavirus-south-korea-religion/2020/09/17/6ea63912-f6fd-11ea-85f7-5941188a98cd_story.html, June 12, 2021.

³ Justin McCurry and Nemo Kim, "How South Korea's evangelical churches found themselves at the heart of the Covid crisis" in *The Guardians*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/23/how-south-koreas-evangelical-churches-found-themselves-at-the-heart-of-the-covid-crisis>. June 12, 2021.

⁴ Neha Arora and Rajendra Jadhav, "India's coronavirus tally overtakes Brazil; thousands join ritual bath", in *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/india-overtakes-brazil-worlds-second-worst-hit-country-by-covid-19-2021-04-12/>. June 12, 2021.

⁵ World Health Organization. "confirmed cases of COVID-19." *Global*. <https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in>. June 12, 2021.

⁶ Nivedita Bhattacharjee, Anuron Kumar Mitra, Kannaki Deka, Manas Mishra, and Sudarshan. "Bodies float down Ganges as nearly 4,000 more die of COVID in India." *Lincoln Feast* (writ.); Raju Gopalakrishnan (ed.). in *Reuters*, Bengaluru and Chennai, May 11, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-seven-day-covid-average-new-high-who-issues-warning-strain-2021-05-11/>.

⁷ Amos Sukamto and S. Panca Parulian. "Religious Community Responses to the Public Policy of the Indonesian Government Related to the covid-19 Pandemic", *Journal of Law, Religion and State* 8, 2-3 (2020): 280. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22124810-2020006>.

have the same opinion by continuing to worship together.⁸ The *Daily Kompas* May 3, 2021, even reported that there is a mosque in Bekasi, West Java, which, on religious grounds, prohibits congregations from praying by wearing masks.⁹ Of course, we cannot ignore what happens in some evangelical wings in the US that till today campaign to reject wearing masks. Their naïve religious concepts and theological ignorance make this pandemic even worse day by day.

All of these events are related to religious arguments. If we look at the common thread, we will find one similarity that in understanding religion, rationality and logic are often subject to the concept of God and religious teachings, so that instead of producing progress, it causes casualties that should not happen. Faith and scientific knowledge should walk together, should they not? Then how can we understand this phenomenon from the point of view of phenomenology and religious theology?

Understanding Phenomenology of Religion

In his book *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, James L. Cook, elucidates what method and methodology in phenomenology are. A method is "a way of doing something and the method explains how a theory is to be tested".¹⁰ From this understanding, we can say that methodology is the science or logic of how a theory is applied systematically. From this explanation, the writer then explains the notion of phenomenology. "Phenomenology of religion is a method adapting the procedures of epoch and eidetic intuition to the study of identifiable communities which base their acts of believing and resulting communal experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities on a tradition that they legitimate by appealing to its authoritative transmission from generation to generation".¹¹

Gerardus van der Leeuw in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation 1933* (English version published in 1938) is the pioneer of this theory. James Cook in the above book argued that he has expanded van der Leeuw's five stages of the phenomenological method and has made it sequential, whereas van der Leeuw argued that his stages were experienced by the scholars

⁸ Amos Sukamto, and S. Panca Parulian. "Religious Community Responses, 276-79.

⁹ Anjani Nur Permatasari, Heboh Video Warga Dilarang Sholat Pakai Masker, Polisi Turun Tangan Bantu Mediasi di *Kompas TV*, <https://www.kompas.tv/article/170552/heboh-video-warga-dilarang-sholat-pakai-masker-polisi-turun-tangan-bantu-mediasi>, June 12, 2021.

¹⁰ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 48.

¹¹ James L. Cook, *Introduction*, 48.

simultaneously.¹² Leeuw's five stages are *assigning name, interpolation, performing epoche, clarification, and understanding*.¹³

Cook expands these stages into nine. Generally, the stages are:

1. *Performing Epoche*. This term comes from Husserl. In the philosophy of phenomenology, Husserl calls this intentionality.¹⁴ *Epoche*, from the Greek language, means "to stop or hold back – means to suspending judgments, puts the observer's idea, presupposition, thoughts, or belief in a bracket".¹⁵ For Cook, the purpose is "for the phenomena to speak for themselves".¹⁶ It keeps the phenomena from being distorted by observer belief systems. *Epoche* helps the data to "appear as they are".¹⁷ For van der Leeuw, this step is in the third phase. In my opinion, *Epoche* is important and is crucially effective to challenge social scientific reductionism, evolutionary interpretations of religious development, projectionist theories, and theological reductionism.
2. *Fostering Empathetic Interpolation*. The author claims that in this context empathy means "a process of cultivating a feeling for the practice and beliefs of other religions, and to interpolate means to insert what has appeared from another religion or culture into one's own experience by translating it into terms one can understand".¹⁸ In this step, researchers must 'enter into the experience of the believing community under study. We can compare this step with Husserl's inter-subjectivity "where the phenomenologist 'gets inside' the mind of the other based on one's own subjective experience."¹⁹
3. *Maintaining Epoche*. In this stage, the author warns that we should be very careful and aware that being emphatic does not mean conversion.²⁰ Ninian Smart asserts that this step refers to "methodological agnosticism" by which he meant simply that 'we neither

¹² Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. Ninian Smart and John Evan Turner (Princeton University Press, 2014). 674.

¹³ Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence*. 674-676.

¹⁴ Read more in Husserl's prominent books, Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by F. Kersten (Canada: Springer, 1983).

¹⁵ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 28.

¹⁶ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 28.

¹⁷ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 50.

¹⁸ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 52.

¹⁹ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 53.

²⁰ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 55.

affirm nor deny the existence of the gods”.²¹ C. Jouco Bleeker argues that maintaining epoche also means maintaining a 'position of impartiality'.²²

4. *Describing the phenomena.* The purpose of this stage is to describe the data observed accurately. For Cook, words, actions, gestures, songs, symbols, explanations by adherents, and stories must be recorded in detail. The researcher's descriptions also must correspond as faithfully as possible to the believer's testimony.²³
5. *Naming the phenomena.* The observer will follow a pattern similar to that of the philosophical phenomenologist who builds structures of consciousness from perceptions of the phenomena. The structure of religion can only be derived after assigning names or creating categories into which the similar types of phenomena described at Step 4 can be inserted.”²⁴ Leeuw locates it at stage one.
6. *Describing relations and processes.* In this stage, we need to consider how historical and cultural developments have influenced religious phenomena. The phenomenologist also encourages seeing the connection of myth, art, and symbol and how they interrelate to shape particular rituals or moral laws in a community.²⁵ Different scholars have different names for this stage. James Cook slightly overviews it on pages 60-61 (Ursula King: historical phenomenology, Wilfred Cantwell Smith: cumulative tradition, C. Jouco Bleeker: *entelechia* – the pattern of change).²⁶
7. *Making informed comparison.* The purpose of this stage is to understand and compare the content of the phenomena. “After naming the phenomena and noting relationships and processes among them, the scholar can now begin to compare the content of the phenomena which has been organized into typological classifications.”²⁷
8. “*The eidetic intuition* - Understanding the meaning of religion. The goal of this stage is to see into the essence or meaning of religion in general.”²⁸

²¹ Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), 54.

²² Claas Jouco Bleeker, *The Sacred Bridge: Researches into the Nature and Structure of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 3.

²³ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 57.

²⁴ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 58.

²⁵ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 60.

²⁶ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 60-61.

²⁷ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 62.

²⁸ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 63.

9. *Testing the intuition.* Some scholars argue that this stage is not important. However, it is always needed to re-examine the relevancy of our theory.

The phenomena that globally occur in religion during this pandemic above are analyzed through this phenomenological theory. However, performing epoche does not mean we simply approve of the naivety of religious practices and understandings above. Here is the significant role of theo-philosophical interpretation. I critically deconstruct religious rituals that put lives at risk. For me, the eidetic function of religions is to preserve love and life. Regardless of these virtues, religions may have been turned out of God.

Ingeniously, James Cook also dialogizes this stage with Mircea Eliade who proposed the idea of “*hierophany*: *hieros*: ἱερός, 'sacred, holy' and the verb *phainein*: φαίνειν, 'to reveal, to bring to light' means the manifestation and the sacred”.²⁹ “Hierophanies are mundane worldly objects which become the avenues for making known to humans what otherwise would remain utterly incomprehensible”.³⁰ This concept seems similar to Aristotle’s idea of form and matter,³¹ or in Immanuel Kant’s words: “*phenomena and noumena*”.³² Back to Eliade, he explains that hierophanies reveal “a paradoxical coming together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming. For Eliade hierophanies, as told in myths and re-enacted in rituals, provides the key concept for interpreting religion universally”.³³ Eliade also argues that “this is a general theory of religion which he believes applied in all cultural and social contexts, and thus can be regarded as providing a statement about the universal essence of religion”.³⁴

I opine that the analogy of Eliade really helps to connect the particularity of belief to the universality of “The Ultimate Being”. For me, the book of David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, and Roger Haight’s, *Jesus the Symbol of God* and *Dynamic of Theology* will help theologians to comprehend the similarity and the dissimilarity of religious symbols.

Combining and integrating Leeuw and Cook’s phenomenological stages, I argue, it can be synthesized into three shorter stages: descriptive analysis (performing and maintaining

²⁹ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 65.

³⁰ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 65.

³¹ Further reading, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Joe Sachs (trans.) (New Mexico: Green Lion Press, 1999).

³² Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1965).

³³ Mircea Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Bison Books, 1996), 29.

³⁴ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 65.

epoche, describing and naming phenomena), comparative (interpolation, making informed comparison, describing relation and process), and constructive (eidetic and testing the intuition). By this, in this study, I am endeavoring to integrate and solidify phenomenology, comparative religions, and constructive theology into an inter-discipline theo-philosophical approach.

Debunking and Decolonizing the Concepts of Religions and God

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, an expert on comparative religions from Harvard University in his book *"The Meaning and End of Religion"*, asserts that the concept of religion is inadequate³⁵. He claims it is better and more helpful to drop it. He insists that the concept is misleading, imprecise, and unreliable.³⁶ Historically, he is not alone in this claim. Other prominent thinkers have similarly suggested that the understanding of religion is biased and must be debunked.

Karl Barth in his book *"Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1.2, Sections 16-18: The Doctrine of the Word of God"* argues that "religion is unbelief and sin".³⁷ He, in this book, in quite long pages 81-127, explains the need to abolish religion before Christian revelation. Precisely he mentioned, "but in the history of Christianity, just because it is the religion of revelation, the sin is, as it were, committed with a high hand. Yes, sin! For contradiction against grace is unbelief, and unbelief is sin, indeed it is the sin."³⁸ He also asserts that without the relation to God "Christian religion is just a mask, then even if it is the most perfect and logical form of Christianity it is unbelief like all other heathen religions. It is falsehood and wrong and an abomination before God"³⁹

Emil Brunner, a well-known Reformed theologian from Switzerland in his book *"Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge"* also argues that this [Christian] revelation ought not to be called 'religion'. . . 'Religion is the product of man's sinful blindness'.⁴⁰ Paul Tillich also regrets using this term in his study.⁴¹ C.S. Lewis asserts that religion is an

³⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), 109.

³⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 113-114.

³⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1.2, Sections 16-18: "The Doctrine of the Word of God, Study Edition 4"*, Edition 22 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 141.

³⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 141.

³⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 159.

⁴⁰ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*. transl. by Olive Wyon, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), 272, 264.

⁴¹ Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 1-5.

"odious word, seldom used in Scripture, and hard to imagine".⁴² Dietrich Bonhoeffer preferred to use "a religionless Christianity",⁴³ - to name a few. Again, it is inadequate because religion is a human construct based on the observable practice and tradition of religious men. Smith asserts that the use of this concept represents a secular and desperate society, even he mentions it as blasphemy.⁴⁴ It is inadequate because it replaces the Ultimate Being - instead of worshipping God, the concept leads the people to worship religion. He encourages the readers to drop it because it hinders people to come to God.⁴⁵ He emphasizes that God loves the people not the concept. "God does not reveal religions; He ('She') reveals Himself".⁴⁶ The concept of religion is not enough to describe the Reality that it represents. The observer and the participant comprehend this concept differently. Smith argues that there are two reasons to abandon this concept, they are "God and history".⁴⁷ For Smith, "Not all observers believe in God, and not all the devout are concerned with history; but it is difficult to escape both."⁴⁸ He elucidates that God is a reality that cannot be observed by the outsider. The outsiders are only able to analyze the phenomena of the religious traditions may it be dance, ritual, prayer, stone, prose, doctrine, and the like. Nevertheless, the transcendence, God, is an apophatic 'being', an endless mystery. God cannot be fully described by any logic and language. Reification is always incomplete and biased. Smith quotes how Aristotle employed the word "unicorn" to depict his notion.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Smith problematizes western epistemology on religion that uses a scientific approach to articulate the "beyond scientific objects" - God.

James Cook also considers this as the serious problem of the western concept of religion. He argues that the western concept has narrowed and irresponsibly reduced the concept of religion and God. He mentions it as social scientific reductionism that "interprets religious behavior using theories employed within one specific discipline"⁵⁰ (sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.). Cook problematizes the social scientific approach that finds explanations

⁴² C.S. Lewis "Foreword" in *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*, Reissue edition, by Joy Davidman (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953), 9.

⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison* (London, 1953, 1959), 91, 93, 94. The recent publication is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Updated edition (Princeton, N.J.: Touchstone, 1997).

⁴⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 116.

⁴⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 116.

⁴⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 116.

⁴⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 121-122.

⁴⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 122.

⁴⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 129.

⁵⁰ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 34.

for any subject of investigation by reference to a single causative factor or family of related causative factors.⁵¹ He also disagrees with evolutionary interpretations of religious development that are influenced by Darwinianism. It argues that religions develop similarly with other biological species and cultures. It moves from the primitive form of belief to a more advanced system that we call religion.⁵² For Cook projectionists, theories which argue that religion developed out of some human need that has been enlarged or projected onto an ultimate being are also inaccurate.⁵³ The core idea of these theories is to justify that God is created by human imagination. Finally, Cook asserts theological reductionism as the core problem of religious concepts. He elucidates, “theological reductionism refers to a practice of evaluating every religion by the criteria established by one alone.”⁵⁴ It is a theological practice to assess other religions through his own and judge all are wrong and only his or her religion is right.

Cook and Smith equally refuse scientific reductionism to apprehend religion. For Smith, science does not interest in essence – science understands matters through “how it operates, and how it changes.”⁵⁵ Another reason that he argues to support the inadequacy of this concept is that religion is a stable noun meanwhile the religious experience is fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing history. “For essences do not have a history. Essences do not change. Yet it is an observable and important fact that what has been called the religions do, in history, change”.⁵⁶ Nor has he yet done, this concept for him is inadequate because it is confusing. Religions: Muslim, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Jews, and others, are outsiders’ names where for participants the idea of religion is deeply abiding in the heart of the transcendence. Religious traditions are a reflection of religious men traditionalized in history. Their faith is greater than its accumulative history.⁵⁷ For Smith to understand religious experience better one has not to deal with religion but with the religious persons.⁵⁸ In another vantage point, mostly, human understanding of religions and God is inevitably inseparable. Epistemologically, German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann says:

⁵¹ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 34.

⁵² James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 36.

⁵³ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 40.

⁵⁴ James L. Cook, *Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, 43.

⁵⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 129.

⁵⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 130.

⁵⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 138.

⁵⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 138.

Theology has only one problem: God. We are theologians for God's sake. God is our dignity. God is our suffering. God is our hope. But where is God? An initial answer is to say that God is the subject of his own existence. Therefore, God is not in our religion, our culture, or our church. God is in his own presence and in his own kingdom. Our churches, cultures, and religions are then in their own truth if they are in God's presence.⁵⁹

In line with Moltmann, C.S. Song from Asia opined:

“Christian theology has made the hidden God is too transparent. It makes us supposing had seen God. Of course, it is only our theological imagination. The work of theology nowadays, especially for us as Asian – Christian is to visit and encounter ‘God’ that may be present in some hidden places of nations, persons, religions, and its cultures.”⁶⁰

He extends,⁶¹

“It is really true, that God concept is universal. God is not the monopoly of any country, also not belongs to any distinctive country. There is no any country, however its goodness and pious able to imprison God. There is no any person however; he/she is, able to claim a final expression about God. God really remembered Israelite but He did also remember Babel. God strongly remembers Christians, of course, but He never ignores the prosperity of other faiths and other cultures. So, what is the orthodox in faith and what is the truth in theology? There is no other orthodoxy except the orthodoxy of God. There is no truth except the truth of God. It is not what we – religions and theologians – believe and actualize that makes what we believe becoming orthodox and what we do becoming true. If God called Koresh, the king of nonbeliever as the anointed king - it was an orthodoxy. If God pointed him as His shepherd, it was the true theology.”

Song shares Moltmann’s notion: ‘God is in his own presence’. Song debunks how the religions easily tend to narrow God. He is correct in seeing God as limitless, independent, and self-sufficient in choosing His/Her wishes. In this understanding, we know that it is a vanity effort to formulate, redefine, and understand God and His/Her designs completely. To reiterate what they have argued, God has a limit, and God's limit is His/Her unlimited presence and being. According to S. Mark Heim, no concept can absolutely control God's perspective.⁶² Here,

⁵⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *God for Secular City: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1999), 5.

⁶⁰ Choan Seng Song, *Allah Yang Turut Menderita*, trans. Sthepen Suleeman (Jakarta: BPK GM, 2007), 48.

English version of this book is *The Compassionate of God*.

⁶¹ Choan Seng Song, *Allah Yang Turut Menderita - The Compassionate of God*, 66, 73, 75, 80.

⁶² Choan Seng Song, *Allah Yang Turut Menderita*, 91, 124, further: compare with the original source from books of Mark Heim, *Salvation Truth and Difference in Religion* (2000) and *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (2001).

I like to extend it to religions: none of them can claim to have God's absolute view. Religions are a piece of the puzzle of God that no one can fully apprehend.

By interrogating and re-evaluating the concepts above, we urgently need to rethink the concept of religions and God. In order to locate religion and the concept of God proportionally, we need to rediscover how we put faith in God and how we critically live with rational and critical religions. It is the only way to encounter the 'prodigal religion and prodigal God'⁶³ in the current postmodern context.

Theological Phenomenology of "The Masking God": Engaging Roger Haight and Wilfred Cantwell Smith in Search of the Loving and Living God in the Ongoing Deadly Covid-19 Pandemic

Even though they have different backgrounds, Roger Haight and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have tight theo-philosophical resemblance. Haight is a member of the Jesuit Society and former President of America's Catholic Theological Society. He has magnificently written various books including the most controversial "*Jesus the Symbol of God*". For Haight humans mostly establish a system of meaning that they consider as truth and fundamental value.⁶⁴ In his book *Dynamic of Theology*, particularly in the first two chapters, he thoroughly articulates what faith is. Height argues that the nature of faith is the center of human life. Its object is absolutely transcendent and infinite. Thus the object of faith is God.⁶⁵ Paul Tillich in his book *Dynamic of Faith* argues that faith is the ultimate concern.⁶⁶ Back to Haight, he asserts that faith is beyond human ordinary knowledge. Because the object of faith is the absolute transcendence and infinite so human's limited knowledge and logic are not able to apprehend it. Faith is only understandable through imagination. It is what David Tracy argues as '*Analogical Imagination*'.⁶⁷ Haight argues "one cannot have faith in God without imagining or constructing images of

⁶³ I am borrowing the phrase of Timothy Keller in his book, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Reprint edition (Penguin Books, 2011).

⁶⁴ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), read chapters 1 and 2. The book is a kindle edition and has no pages.

⁶⁵ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, chapter 1 and 2. no page - kindle edition.

⁶⁶ See, Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 2009).

⁶⁷ For more read, David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998).

God".⁶⁸ So there are two elements that we have to be careful about in Haight's theology that is the object of faith – that is transcendence, infinite, and incomprehensible – and human images about the object of faith. These two aspects are radically different. The first is the reality of God and the second is human imagination about God. Human imaginations are influenced by human ideology. What I mean by ideology is the human perception of the reality of this world. For Haight faith and ideology somehow are intermingled and correlative, they are different but coexist and mutually interpenetrate each other.⁶⁹ Rationally it makes sense because without worldly imagination, like the human idea, image construction, and analogy, faith can never be understood. In short, these worldly ideas are utilized as the symbol of the mysterious-unknowable-infinite reality of God.

In this sense, I argue that God as the object of faith reveals Him/Herself through the worldly symbols in order to make humans relate, be with and limitedly understand the mysterious essence of God. Thus, these worldly religious symbols are the mask of God. They are not God but God who is analogized to what is not God. They are 'the masking God'. Humans see the 'mask', the symbol but will never fully understand the essence of God. In addition, Haight argues that faith is different from belief and knowing. Faith is the knowledge about the infinite God. Knowing is about the scientific seen things while belief is the expression of faith. For Haight, belief is based on testimony.⁷⁰ It is developed from the human witness, experience, and confession. According to Haight, there can be one faith but expressed in multiple beliefs that represent the same object of faith.⁷¹ Here is the urgency of theological-philosophical interpretation. Without comprehensive methodological interpretation, humans can perceive beliefs, symbols, or worldly religious imagination as God rather than means to reach or to know God. Haight's theological theory is meant to help us to differentiate either God or the mask of God. We frequently see, as in the religious phenomena elucidated in the section above, where people tend to treat the 'mask of God' as God and leave the true-mysterious loving and living God behind. It is idolatry,⁷² and it is religious naivety.

⁶⁸ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, chapter 1 and 2. no page - kindle edition.

⁶⁹ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, chapter 1 and 2. no page - kindle edition.

⁷⁰ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, chapter 1 and 2. no page - kindle edition.

⁷¹ Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, chapter 1 and 2. no page - kindle edition.

⁷² See my article, Parulihan Sipayung, "Fenomena Pemberhalaan Agama". *Indonesian Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (Desember 30, 2014): 155-178. <https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v2i2.73>.
<https://indotheologyjournal.org/index.php/home/article/view/73>.

On the other hand, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a prominent comparative religious scholar from Canada argues that faith is beyond human understanding. He asserts “faith cannot be precisely delineated or verbalized; that it is something too profound, too personal, and too divine for public exposition.”⁷³ The observer has frequently misunderstood this terminology because it lies in participants' relations to transcendence. Faith cannot completely be comprehended but it can be expressed in many forms such as “in words, both prose, and poetry; in patterns of deeds, both ritual and morality; in art, in institutions, in law, in community, in character; and in many other ways.”⁷⁴ Religious traditions are the expression of faith without faith they are meaningless. They are profane expressions of the sacred faith. They can be observed and analyzed but faith cannot. However they are imperfect, mundane, and limited but they are useful because they point out something beyond them, the transcendence. According to Smith, one of the most important expressions of faith is character.⁷⁵ He argues, “to assess a religious tradition by the kind of character that its faith produces would seem more legitimate than to do so on grounds of reason, or revelation, or any impersonal standard, were it not that none of us is in a position to judge.”⁷⁶

Prose like Apostle Creed is also the expression of faith. But the point is not the language. Language is only an instrument. The religious experience of the participant is matters. It is the person who engages with the transcendence, not the language/instrument.⁷⁷ He mentions “the proper way to understand a religious statement is to endeavor not to see what its words and clauses mean (which may too easily become, what they mean to me), but to see what they meant to the man who first uttered them, and what they have meant to those since for whom they have served as expressions of their faith.”⁷⁸ However, this expression will never fully represent faith. It is just our tool to describe the un-describable transcendence Reality. For Smith, “theology is part of the traditions, is part of this world. Faith lies beyond theology, in the hearts of men. The truth lies beyond faith, in the heart of God”.⁷⁹ According to Smith, even though we cannot fully comprehend faith, it is like a feeling, we do not grasp it perfectly but we feel it. He argues “man

⁷³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 154.

⁷⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 155.

⁷⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 160.

⁷⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 161.

⁷⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 165.

⁷⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 165.

⁷⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 167.

can know in part what other men know at heart.”⁸⁰ By this nature of logic, Smith argues “we can understand, not with complete assurance but with reasonable confidence, and not fully but in significant part, what the faith of other persons is and has been.”⁸¹

Smith asserts that faith is personal, a living quality.⁸² Faith is a human response and mundane. He asserts, “there is no ideal faith that I ought to have. There is God whom I ought to see, and a neighbor whom I ought to love. These must suffice me, and my faith is my ability to see that they abundantly more than suffice”.⁸³ He continues, “the ideal towards which I move is not an ideal of my own faith but is God Himself, and my neighbor himself. Faith is not part of eternity; it is my present awareness of eternity.”⁸⁴ From Smith's argumentation, we can analyze that faith is beyond human reason because it lies in the heart of God but faith is also a human response. It is mundane. If so it is observable through its expression and character.

Smith's thoughts have helped us philosophically and theologically rethink and revise our ways of thinking and understanding of religions and God. His epistemology and his deep engagement with other religious traditions are valuable to bring out this explanation. Moreover, Smith's notion is ingeniously relevant to the current global-philosophical-theological conversation where religious naivety arises like pandemic within pandemic. If religious people consider and think about it profoundly, religions may bring more constructive contribution to the society because there is a humble sense of incompleteness that leads to learning more from the other while ready to rethink, revise and reconsider its previous religious thoughts.

Conclusion

Haight and Smith synthetically articulate that God is infinite, faith is a transcendental religious knowledge and both are expressed in worldly images or symbols. Haight and Smith precisely elucidate what my core argument is, that God whom we know through religion, is a masking God. A masking God is a God that is indeed present but present in absence. Or we can also argue, God is absent in presence. In Christian theology, the masking God is an idea that historically and continuously appears. Jacob had encountered this masking God by saying

⁸⁰ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 169

⁸¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 170.

⁸² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 170.

⁸³ Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 172.

⁸⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 172-173.

“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” (Gen 28:16). Gospel of John argues that “God is Spirit” (John 4:24). God in the ‘masking spirit’ is present everywhere – omnipresence. Again, John asserts, “The wind (*pneuma* that is also translated as Spirit) blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). Apostle Paul beautifully argues “For now we see only a reflection (‘a mask’) as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully,” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Indeed God is a masking God. To understand God is to be aware that religions are only instruments – a tool. Smith argues, “They will end when we reach our goal, God is our goal”.⁸⁵ Smith affirms, “The traditions evolve, men's faith varies. God endures”.⁸⁶ For Haight also, traditions, beliefs, and religions are means. God in mask presents in these means. Thus to reach God we should go critically and rationally beyond these profane and deadly-naïve masks and beautifully opened to be embraced by the mysterious presence of a loving and living God. Apostle Paul says God is around us. “God is not far from any one of us. For in God we live and move and have our being” (Act. 17:27-28). For where there is love and life, there is God. These virtues are the core essence of God’s presence that religions should perform in this global pandemic: Love and Life.

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⁸⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 181.

⁸⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 173.

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