

## Conception of Islam in the Religious Study The Analysis of W.C Smith's Thought

Imamul Wathoni

UIN Walisongo Semarang  
[wathonimamul@gmail.com](mailto:wathonimamul@gmail.com)

### *Abstract*

*Wilfred Cantwell Smith is one of scholars of religion who tries to compose a concept with vague delineation related to Islam as religion. It is in essence much related to the word piety, in turn related much to Iman as instrument through which human grasps the consciousness and fact of God, manifested in Submission to His will. Smith starts by deconstructing religion both as a term and concept, including Islam as species of religion. What is understood as religion is basically nothing on earth, and yet the phenomena of religiousness is easy to discover, namely as response to the Divinity. Such understanding is referred to personal and individual experience. Smith, therefore, understands Islam as self-entity and distinguishable from other, emphasized on several meanings of Islam, 1. Islam is personal submission (in the form of verbal noun, it is ideal and true sense), 2. Islam which is embodied in community (it is refied sense from sociological lens produced by cumulative tradition), 3. Islam in terms of institutionalism that its adherents refer to, be manifested in al-Qur'an and al-Hadits through which its name and all teaching come into being (since it is the fruit of cumulative tradition which adheres to historical process, it is therefore mundane).*

**Keywords:** *Islam, faith, belief, reification, cumulative tradition*

## Abstrak

Wilfred Cantwell Smith ialah salah seorang sarjana agama yang berusaha menyusun konsep mengenai Islam sebagai agama dengan gambaran yang sedikit kabur. Esensinya banyak berkaitan dengan kata saleh, yang pada gilirannya berkaitan dengan Iman sebagai instrumen manusia dalam menangkap kesadaran dan sekaligus fakta akan Tuhan. Smith memulai dengan cara mendekonstruksi terma dan konsep agama, termasuk di dalamnya Islam sebagai rincian dari terma agama. Apa yang dipahami sebagai agama pada dasarnya tidak ada di bumi, akan tetapi fenomena keagamaan mudah ditemukan, yakni respon terhadap ketuhanan. Pemahaman semacam itu mengacu pada pengalaman personal dan individual. Karenanya Smith memahami bahwa Islam sebagai entitas diri dan dapat dibedakan dari yang lain, penekanannya pada beberapa makna Islam, 1) Islam ialah penyerahan personal (dalam bentuk kata benda verbal, ini pengertian ideal dan sejati), 2) Islam which yang terwujud dalam masyarakat (ini hasil reifikasi dari lensa sosiologis yang diproduksi oleh tradisi kumulatif), 3) Islam dalam hal institusi yang menjadi acuan bagi penganutnya, termanifestasi dalam al-Qur'an dan al-Hadits yang mana nama dan seluruh ajarannya mewujudkan (karena ia adalah buah dalam tradisi kumulatif yang melekat pada proses sejarah, *karenanya ia bersifat duniawi*).

**Kata kunci:** Islam, iman, keyakinan, reifikasi, tradisi kumulatif

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### A. Introduction

What is then to be the polemic and heavy refusal from majority of the Muslim scholars, is that the way Islam is put rather problematic of which has been very different from the mainstream understanding of Muslim majority. Islam as entity which is conceptually regarded by Muslim as fixed and unchanged concept from the passing of time, now is on trial in the religious study. In the study of religion, such a scheme becomes opposite with the spirit of truth claim, which is mostly held by every single religion, and that with no exception prevailing to Islam.<sup>1</sup> This research, therefore, will discuss about and answer ontological

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<sup>1</sup> Ayesha Qurrat ul Ain, "[PDF] Wilfred Cantwell Smith's Concept of Religion: An Islamic Appraisal | Semantic Scholar," accessed November 16, 2021, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Wilfred-Cantwell-Smith%E2%80%99s-Concept-of-Religion%3A-An-Ain/93a32462adfe992c27b81bc872e90646f198cbcd>.

scheme of conceptual religion of Islam as entity that emerges in world in the perspective of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Is there significant perception and similarity of Muslim majority as ones who believe in Islam (insider), or that is there demarcation line that separates the understanding between Muslim and the non-Muslim scholars' (outsider). This research is library research, which uses critical-descriptive method toward the thought of Wilfred Cantwell Smith regarding his conception of Islam alongside with its ontological structure. Through his various primary works, W.C Smith emphasizes at radical historical aspect, which deconstruct a fixed understanding of Islam that Muslim majority have been believing so far.

## B. Construction of Religion and Belief

Religion is one important term which has fundamentally different aspect to which human being adhere to. Smith views religion ontologically from the history and structure through which God along with His messenger construe some basic understanding of truth and reality, essence of the world even the life after death. In the understanding of religion as concept, Smith discerns some fundamental error on the definition of religion whether as a concept or term and at once a system which is usually used and understood in daily and contemporary life. Based on his idea, what is meant with religion, historically doesn't appear concretely in reality even on earth. The understanding of human regarding religion from the passing time has been evolving and shifting. That can be historically proven from diverse views and opinions, that there is no word agreement on this in what religion truly means, as Smith states:

Next may be noted the sheer fact of change. The world is in flux, and we know it. Like other aspects of human life, the religious aspect too is seen to be historical, evolving, in process. Any modern endeavor to clarify what religion is, must now include a question as to what at various stages of development religion has been. And if it doesn't venture on some speculation as to what it may become in the future, at least there is recognition that, like everything else that we know on earth; religion may be expected to continue to change.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, Smith views that religion in the sense of a fixed system as understood today is something complicated even indefinable. It cannot be found in an adequate definition, due to its emergence both as

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 8.

term and concept departs from ancient and classical belief which later on is continuously evolving and on process to be in line with the changing time and the passing history. Thus a consequence to comprehend its term and concept, Smith deconstruct the term historically and discerns its meaning, function and use in every age and even to some extent, Smith suggests to remove the term as daily use for it is disturbing and tend to separate the inter-community of faith who in fact believe in the transcendent entity. Nevertheless, Smith states on this regard, that the phenomena of religiousness has been embedded in human's soul or in heart as natural disposition. The phenomena of religiosity or religiousness, has since been existing throughout history, it is existed and undeniable fact for it is innate quality to human's self, as Smith asserted;

This much at least is clear and is crucial; that men throughout history and throughout the world have been able to be religious without assistance of special term, without the intellectual analysis that the term implies. In fact, I have come to feel that, in some ways, it is probably easier to be religious without the concept; that the notion of religion can become an enemy to piety. One might almost say that the concern of the religious man is with God; the concern of the observer is with religion. This is too quippish; yet it is not absurd. For the religious man in less sophisticated societies or of less mature piety one would have to substitute less absolute references that God in this aphorism. Such a man is concerned with the divine as mediated through the traditions a less personal references for the Absolute than God would be required. In any case, it is not entirely foolish to suggest that the rise of the concept religion is some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion its self.<sup>3</sup>

Smith on this, argues that there are three phases that human must pay attention regarding to anything which directly points to religion itself. Smith argues that there are three levels here that are involved, which shapes the way men think of religion. First, there are the words that men use. Secondly, there are the concepts in their minds, of which these words are the more or less effective expression. Thirdly, there is the real world, of some aspects of which the concepts are the more or less adequate representation.<sup>4</sup> In the deconstruction of concept of religion, Smith begins by problematizing the term.

Religion per se, is commonly not an entity that is easily understandable in itself, nor valid object to study and to put in question by the

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 20.

scholars and the believer. Since throughout history the term religion as humans understand today has been produced in the modern age. Due to the use of term, the religion becomes problematic to Smith, and therefore there should be critical reading more to the concept of that humans are using. Smith argues that the term religion is quite difficult to define least since the last decades. Of various definition that is attempted to be given is not satisfying and widely accepted. What most of us believe in common about religion is consequently necessary to not other that the dynamics and cultural creation made of and produced by human being. As Smith states

The term is notoriously difficult to define. At least there has been in recent decades a bewildering variety of definition; and no one of them has commanded wide acceptance. In some cases of this sort, a repeated failure to agree, to reach any satisfying answer or even to make any discernible progress towards one, has turned out to mean that men have been asking a wrong question. In this instance one might argue that the sustained inability to clarify what the word religion signifies, in itself suggests that the term ought to be dropped; that it is a distorted concept not really corresponding to anything definite or distinctive in the objective world. The phenomena that religious undoubtedly exist. Yet perhaps the notion that they constitute in themselves some distinctive entity is an unwarranted analysis.<sup>5</sup>

In this case, the history of religion whether as concept or term, in academic and western viewpoint, starts and cannot get rid of the dynamics of Christianity throughout history. Smith reads up previously with historical approach which by discerning to the past to grasp the term and concept from the dark ages to modern time. Some Christian scholars' on which he bases his arguments, to name some, as John Calvin, Zwingli, Marsilion Ficino and Martin Luther, represented from renaissance to reformation. Thomas Aquinas, Santo Agustinus, Lucterius and including Cicero, are to mention some Christian scholars of middle ages which is to be taken into consideration.<sup>6</sup>

In referring to the past, Smith justifies the term religion from ancient Greek which is relatively used with its dynamics up to Roman period and Renaissance as factual points. He regards that concerning the use of that term, religion as fixed and institutionalized concept as to what happens today has actually been produced by the modern age on which the basic

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, 21–22.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 23–38.

idea of that presupposition embedded in trans-historical and trans-cultural principle. That it obviously is all about different configuration of power that brings about the clash and distinguishable one party with other which its role practically played by the Church as representative of Christianity which then shapes the entity of state that controls power and strong influence in society.<sup>7</sup> Smith, regarding this point, states plainly;

If one's own religion is attacked, by unbelievers who necessarily conceptualize it schematically, or all religion is, by the indifferent, one tends to leap to the defense of what is attacked, so that presently participants of a faith, especially those most involved in argument are using the term in the same externalist and theoretical sense as are their opponents. Religion as a systematic entity, as it emerged in the seventeenth century and eighteenth centuries, is a concept of polemics and apologetics.<sup>8</sup>

Smith would clarify that the term religion prone to be more personal side in adjective form of human, it is not entity in the noun form that divides and distinguishes one man over other. An adjective form means by which humans have personal relation with God without any bridge or mediator that impair them.<sup>9</sup> Religion formerly has different meaning that of today. In the past it has equivalent meaning with faith, and in some case with piety. Religion comes from Latin word *religio* or *religiones* which means something equivalent to the word piety. For this reason, Smith proposes that the concept and term religion should be dropped at least in all but the first, personalist sense. This is on the grounds not merely that it would be helpful to do so; but more strongly that it is misleading to retain them. Smith suggests that the term is confusing, unnecessary, and distorting, confusing. He believes that the vitality of of personal faith, on the one hand, and other wuite separately, progress in understanding even at the academic level of the traditions of other people throughout history and throughout the world, are both seriously blocked by our attempt to conceptualize what is involved in each case in terms of a religion.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3., see in chapter 2, 57., Ali A. Alawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 111–13.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 42–43.

<sup>9</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990), 3–20.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 48–49.

In this respect, conception of religion, is stressed on two element which mutually relating, namely historicism and religious phenomena as basic presupposition, hence as consequence men would have an understanding that gradually becomes evolving as epistemic foundation. This can be basically proven by the essence of religion itself which is to know the fact of God. As God in through Western historical concept has been a verbal symbol by which human being grasp God's existence from emotional and psychological viewpoint.<sup>11</sup>

### C. Faith and Cumulative Tradition

After exposing the concept of religion in Smith's perspective, it can then be inferred that in this regard two central concepts have relation with religion, namely faith and cumulative tradition. What it means by that, is human and the dynamics of religion is inter-related position and cannot get separated. Cumulative tradition as concept in the form of a drove, wadding and unification of events and occurrence and is incident in the scope of history of which religion emerges out. The role of history in this case and in the context of religious tradition is applying absolute as the consequence of the first principle of the cumulative tradition itself, as Smith contends;

The cumulative tradition as a concept, therefore, is not inflexible or final, either in content or in form. It is not given by the world, but is a human construct offered to order what is given. It is a device by which the human mind may rewardingly and without distortion introduce intelligibility into the vast flux of human history or any given part of it. It refers, I contend, something intelligible, and empirically knowable, though not to an independent entity, intrinsically coherent or self-subsisting. The concept abstracts from out a total dynamic historical complex a part to which there is legitimacy and value in giving intellectual attention.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the religious tradition emerges out of womb of the process of cumulative tradition in which drove and unification of event and incident take place and in that people live and at once that through which influences the religion and the man interchangeably. What then Smith means and understands by religion with its tradition is not other

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<sup>11</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Question of Religious Truth* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1967), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 152.

than construction and cultural matrix, in other word a custom creation of man-made which is continuously going on and proceeding with and in the changing time at certain place, of which the central figure is human himself, as Smith asserted;

A religious tradition, then, is the historical construct, in the continuous and continuing construction, of those who participate in it. These are in interaction, also, and this can be highly significant, with those who do not participate. They are in interaction also, and this too can prove highly relevant, with a total environment that may include earthquakes or modern medicine, moonlit lakes or tyrannous government.<sup>13</sup>

Such a explanation of Smith, in terms of religious tradition, specifically refers to certain act which produces doctrines, credos, rites, rituals and as such. Just to mention some, prophet, religious scholars, Buddhist Monk, Bishop, sacred texts, religious traditional performance and so forth, are central concern of the religion from which it produces a kind of fruits of cumulative tradition. In this regard, Smith, would assert that all religion is in equal position, they experience the same step and dynamic, that religion has a figure which is influenced by the environment he lives in, therefore it is called mundane process for the world in it he passes a process of historical dynamics.

When it comes to faith, Smith himself prefers to view that faith as a personal quality that men own, it points to a mundane historical reality that he passes through rather than philosophical abstract. His concept of faith rests on the description that character and a personal quality of men, neither religious nor non-religious, make them possibly discover the meaning by which men can live. Faith in this regard, however, cannot be observable, yet it points to the transcendent, and it can only be seen and felt by heart alone. Therefore, faith as driving force by leaving the term religion per se, would be expected by Smith as an asset in the formation of world community in creating peace and harmony, and hence any community of faith can possibly be together.

And on the contrary, in inter-entity of religion, Smith personally doesn't expect many conversions from one to another anywhere in the world in the coming hundred years. Yet men may all confidently expect increasing encounters among the varying traditions, and consequent ferment with each group. It will become increasingly apparent, and is already essentially true, that to be Christian in modern world, or

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, 149.



a Jew or an agnostic, is to be so in society in which other men, intelligent, devout and righteous, are Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu. In this Smith assumes indirectly that it is not ethical, supposing to impose or convert people to other traditions that are different with one another.<sup>14</sup>

#### D. Islam and Reification Process

Islam and diversity of religions have been self-evident truth in daily life of human being. Islam plays significant role throughout world history, with its holistic and comprehensive teaching. In the past, Islam emerges in Arab peninsula by Muhammad as carrier and role model at once in terms of self entity and a kind of institutionalism which is distinct, embodied in two prominent references, namely al-Qur'an and al-Hadits. And yet in modern time, some shift and radical alteration are easy to find when it comes to speaking of Islam religion in which it is understood in the framework of religious study especially conveyed by Smith, which he has in fact restricted the meaning of Islam merely in the form of submission, *istislam* (submission) as manifestation of faith.

For him, Islam is essentially much related to the word piety, in turn related much to Iman as instrument through which human grasp the consciousness and once fact of God. To prove the claim, Smith shows the number of word Islam and Iman statistically as comparison, to convince the readers'. He remarks that the former word (Islam) is less used in al-Qur'an rather than the latter (Iman). For him, Iman is much alive and very vividly expressed in daily life, sincere in act, and yet it is not only restricted to one religious entity as superior and distinguishable one from other, but rather it also can be owned by every single one, for it is inner and given nature which is inside and living in human's heart.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Smith on this tend to rejects the meaning the word Islam as the name of religion (proper name) conceptually revealed by God to prophet Muhammad. In terms of proper name, as name of religion, Islam appeared in modern period and through historical process produced by refied sense in cumulative tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Of religion's concept in Smith's perspective as genus in previous chapter, then it now comes to species namely the so-called Islam as

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<sup>14</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith of Other Men* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1963), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, on the special case for Islam, 75–108.

<sup>16</sup> Fatimah Abdullah and Haslina Ibrahim, "Wilfred Cantwell Smith on the Meaning of Religion and Islam: A Pluralist Dilemma Reexamined," *Al-Shajarah* 18, no. 1 (June 13, 2013): 95.

religion studied. It has been well-known to most Muslim, that Islam as concept and term, has strong root idea centralized in revelation which be manifest in al-Qur'an and Hadits as main primary sources. Islam can only be defined in terms of what it says and how it has passed through. In this regard, Smith argues that Islam is the one and only religion whose name is built in, as stated in holy book the Qur'an. Muslim introduces to other community that Islam is a name of religion from its early existence, and the one professes it, is called Muslim, something that would be difficult and not probably to find in other religious tradition stated in its holy book. This signifies an important position of Islam in world religions throughout history. Smith himself views that Islam as understood today is very much different from Islam the past. He believes that the concept even the term that Islam refers to as religion (*din*) is influenced by the notion and understanding of pre-Islamic concept, particularly referring to Persian's notion of religion, specifically referring to Zaratustra's and Manichee's concept.<sup>17</sup> And what is understood to be Islam as separated and in terms of system and entity distinguishable from other is just has been historical process that appeared later in modern period.

To prove the claim, statistically some verses in the Qur'an, made justification for the term Islam and Iman as two thing same substantial meanings. Islam is only mentioned less than Iman, and it refers not to a system (*nizam*) as the Muslims today understand. Word Islam in al-Qur'an is mentioned eight times, and the word Iman is mentioned forty five times. So does the word *Mu'min* (in its various form, a word that has a connection with Iman appears more than five times, and that is more than the word Muslim. For Smith, Islam is a verbal noun (*masdar*), appearing about a third of the number of occurrence of the basic verb, namely *aslama* (to submit or to surrender). This term is found in various form of change seventy times in total, of which twenty times as a straightforward verb (meaning direct, active and personal), forty two times in the participial form (as a personalist adjective or noun) and only eight times in the noun form or generic form (*gerund*).

This, therefore, becomes epistemic survey on how Islam, whether as concept and term at once a system in an adjective form become exposed. Aside, Smith points to the word Iman as verbal noun and this is also discovered in *gerund* form. Iman, whose equivalence is faith, calls for

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, 75-108.

self and personal awareness, an inner struggle toward the object of men's belief and it is that the very heart of religious belief that Smith has struggled for. However, this has precisely been different with the majority of Muslim narratives, which have so far been believing that Islam from its early period was mature and conceptually need no historical process as Smith exposes in his works, as al-Attas plainly asserted;

The religion of Islam was conscious of its own identity from the time of its revelation. When it appeared on the stage of world history Islam was already mature, needing no process of growing up to maturity. Revealed religion can only be that which knows itself from the very beginning; and self-knowledge comes from the Revelation itself, not from history. The so called development in the religious traditions of mankind cannot be applied to Islam, for what is assumed to be a developmental process is in the case of Islam only a process of interpretation and elaboration which must of necessity occur in altering generations of believers of different nations, and which refer back to the unchanging source.<sup>18</sup>

As logical consequence, the pattern of Islam in the form of mere submission, one can then view that submission itself can take place, subject to the concept of faith and cumulative tradition, to anyone whose faith is totally in God without a need to have such an entity as house for those who believes, the so called religion in fixed and established meaning, since the term faith itself as concept has represented to provide human being what has become his natural disposition in dealing with the reality of life, moreover the reality of transcendence in which this is the locus of God. In this respect, therefore, the role of religion in terms of entity and institutionalism has in fact been irrelevant, due to the concept of faith and cumulative tradition become prominent basis to view reality and the fact of God.

Since to Smith, what is far more important is faith, not a religion per se. Thereby, based on his account, Smith proposes ones to leave a custom of using the term religion, for the word faith itself has been central point and friendly used in today's world. And the word Islam signifies not a system of religion which historically developed with the institutional name, but rather on the personal connection, manifested in faith yang unites a free moral agent to his Creator. The emergence of word Iman and Islam relatively different. The former is active and personal term, and the latter is gradually more systematized. And if it is observed

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<sup>18</sup> "Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction - Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas - Journal of Islamic Philosophy (Philosophy Documentation Center)," accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.pdcnet.org/islamicphil/content/islamicphil20050001000100110043>.

that the use of Islam by most Muslim in reified sense in modern time is a direct consequence of apologetics.<sup>19</sup>

Historically, Smith asserted that, Muhammad never called for people to embrace or to profess a religion in terms of self-entity, but rather to call for and invite people that are deviated at the time to God. It is here the basis and epistemic justification from which Smith conceptualizes Islam, finding some evidences that support his arguments in Islamic scripture. Like any other, Islam for him too, evolving and continuously to be, in which in this perception is called as reification, that something in this Islam, in order to be, must have been historically evolving in the passing time. Smith even convincingly states that Islam is the most reified of all religions because of the vast and the flux of its tradition. What is understood to be Islam based on Smith's idea, is not other than new trend in recent centuries as form of reification, especially pointing back to modern period.<sup>20</sup>

In the study of Islam, Smith critically discern that the framework through which Smith utilizes on the study of Islam has been shadowed by his historical background as Presbyterian Christian. In that, he uses historical materialism based on Marxist's idea to pick Islam as subject matter of the study of religions. So that, at least Islam based on Smith's idea, can be divided into three phases, by which Islam is understood to be in complete and perfect sense.

First, Islam in personal submission (in the form of verbal noun, it is ideal and true sense). It is in its essence has innate correlation with the word "faith", as Smith himself defines in substantial way, making reference to self-commitment of Muslim individual. In the second phase, Islam which is embodied in community (it is reified sense from sociological lens produced by cumulative tradition). Smith personally prefers this one, to be applied in daily life of faith community by restricting, to some extent, leaving the term religion for the sake of faith and cumulative tradition.

And the third is, Islam in terms of institutionalism that its adherents refer to, be manifest in al-Qur'an and al-Hadits through which its name, rites and teaching come into being (since it is the fruit of cumulative tradition which adheres to historical process therefore they are mundane). The second and third, according to Smith, have the same status which are empirical actuality and the platonic idea of a total Islamic

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 104–5.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, 101–5.

system, the pattern of generalization of the religion, a historical and sociological mundane phenomena.<sup>21</sup>

An increasingly full and focused sense of the mundane facets of Islamic evolution, of which Smith find interesting first is the contemporary and very recent developments, but then also the classical and mediaeval. Here are institutions, structures, books, but also nuances, orientations, suppositions and challenges to these and questions, counteractions, specific uncertainties. That religion is a response to a divine initiative. And yet Islam in this has been human activity, and the Muslim's ideal of Islam has been an evolving human vision. Islam has been something that people do, or dream of doing. And to Muslim in this case, is to participate in the Islamic process, as the context of one's religious life for at the historical level to be Muslim has been and is to participate in a particular form of history.<sup>22</sup>

## E. Islam and Reification Process

Based on, the explanation above, this research arrives at the conclusion that Smith's conception of Islam, has been very centralized on his conception of religion. The term religion conceptually is deconstructed and defined in terms of piety and personal relation toward God, which later on, builds the concept of faith and cumulative tradition as the substitute of the term religion as self-entity. Hence including Islam on this, due to process of reification, is divided into three phases which shapes Muslim community and nature of Islam interchangeably, first, Islam in personal submission. Second, Islam which is manifested in community and the third, Islam in terms of institutionalized sense and the last two are historical and mundane process.

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 29–31.

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