

Does *Why Religion Matters* Really Matter?

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Essay Review of Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*

My answer to the question in the title of this essay review is yes and no. Yes, Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters* matters for the same reason that all of his other books matter. Few scholars on comparative religion are able to write about their disciplines as passionately and accessibly as Smith, who is the author of such best-sellers as *The World's Religions* (over 1,500,000 copies sold) and *The Illustrated World's Religions*. His uncanny ability to draw expertly from a number of academic disciplines in analyzing religion's continuing influence in human affairs, coupled with his willingness to write from the heart of a believer, as well as from the head of a scholar, make his books a pure joy to read, whether one is an interested layperson, a disbelieving or believing undergraduate, or a veteran college professor. Smith is strongest in *Why Religion Matters* when he argues that the academy needs to recognize the central place that the quest for religious meaning ought to have on college campuses, as well as in the public arena.

Even though he understands well the failures of the world's religions throughout human history, Smith chooses in the present volume to emphasize the positive contributions. He is at his best here in reminding readers that without a religious sensibility in the academy, as well as in society at large, issues of morality, meaning, and the pursuit of a sustainable truth to live by get marginalized. Rushing to fill the vacuum created by the disappearance of a profound religious consciousness, materialism and consumerism threaten to engulf us all. For Smith, the loss of religious faith in a modernist and postmodernist era, along with the certainties and sense of transcendence that accompany it, leave most of us desperate for an enduring meaning to live and to love.

No matter how intelligent, wealthy, or healthy, sooner or later each of us must deal with the inevitabilities of suffering, loneliness, hopelessness, despair, defeat and, perhaps the most lethal of all, an all-pervasive sense of purposelessness and ennui. The quotation that best sums up Smith's critical stance throughout his volume is this assertion: "If anything characterizes

‘modernity,’ it is a loss of faith in transcendence, in a reality that encompasses but surpasses our quotidian affairs.”¹ Smith’s strength as a religious writer and scholar is to talk about the “religious sense” in such a way as to make it seem universal and necessary. For him, human beings will always look to some greater religious or spiritual force for answers to the ultimate questions. Moreover, at some level they understand that no answer to these questions will ever be entirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, their conviction that there are answers will never waver, because to give up on them is to invite a grinding despair. Finally, human beings need to conduct their search for meaning together, for it is in social groups that religious truth gets discovered, understood, and affirmed.

This book represents one of Smith’s most autobiographical attempts yet to discuss the strengths of religion. The son of two parents who were missionaries to China, Smith was raised to be a believer. It seems as if he has never questioned his own faith in God, which, though somewhat eclectic, given his inclinations to integrate beliefs and practices in his daily devotions from a number of the world’s greater and lesser religions, is mainly Christian. Dotting the text throughout are frequent personal references to the author’s friends and foes, to places where he has taught (including Washington University, MIT, Syracuse University, and the University of California at Berkeley), to successes and failures he has experienced as a worldwide lecturer, teacher, and scholar, and to dramatic spiritual epiphanies that occurred to him both in and out of the academy. In my opinion, the book comes to life whenever the author reflects personally on the ups and downs of his 50-plus years of thinking about, and teaching, the world’s religions and spiritualities.

On the surface, the structure of the book is deceptively simple, although its execution is actually quite complex. Employing a tunnel metaphor throughout, Smith spends Part One analyzing “modernity’s tunnel.” He believes that currently three “worldviews” vie for prominence in modernity’s tunnel: traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism. Smith is unequivocal in his belief that only traditionalism is able to provide the metaphysical answers to the “big picture” questions that people are increasingly asking today. Although Smith acknowledges that traditional answers can sometimes be anti-scientific, literalistic, and polarizing, they alone are able to provide the solace and inspiration that the human spirit requires for its sustenance in all times and places. Here is Smith at his rhetorical best:

The traditional worldview is preferable to the one that now encloses us because it allows for the fulfillment of the basic longing that lies in the depths of the human heart . . .

There is within us—in even the blithest, most lighthearted among us—a fundamental disease. It acts like an unquenchable fire that renders the vast majority of us incapable in this life of ever coming to full peace. This desire lies in the marrow of our bones and the deep regions of our souls. . . . The longing is there, built into us like a jack-in-the-box that presses for release. Two great paintings suggest this longing in their titles—Gauguin’s *Who Are We? Where Did We Come From? Where Are We Going?* And de Chirico’s *Nostalgia for the Infinite*. . . . Whether we realize it or not, simply to be human is to long for release from mundane existence, with its confining walls of finitude and mortality.²

For Smith, modernism and postmodernism are themselves “theophanies,” “religious” stories that people have constructed to answer the “big-picture questions.” On all counts, according to Smith, they fail. Modernism has deified science, progress, colonialism, naturalism, and materialism. Postmodernism has given up altogether on the search for truth by “turning claims to [it] into little more than [political] power plays.”³ Postmodernism has also encouraged a widespread relativism, and the nihilism which is often its tragic offshoot.

The “tunnel” that Smith alludes to throughout his book is the scientific, modernist worldview “into which we have unwittingly wandered.”⁴ The modernist tunnel is incapable of providing us with what we need metaphysically. It is a worldview that puts matter over spirit, naturalism over supernaturalism, “unhappy endings” (no afterlife) over “happy endings” (immortality), contingent meaning (evolution) over ultimate meaning, and “homelessness” (alienation from the universe) over “belongingness” (a binding together in religious community). The “floor” of the tunnel is “scientism,” the belief that science is the only truth, and matter is the most fundamental entity. The tunnel’s “left wall” is higher education, in that all the disciplines (humanities and social sciences) are dominated by science; they either long for the legitimacy of science, or they have transformed themselves into miniature, ersatz sciences. As a result, a state of rampant and rancorous disbelief permeates the American university. Positivism rules; metaphysics grovels. The tunnel’s “roof” includes the media. Popular culture, especially liberal journalism, is secular to the core and anti-religious. The tunnel’s “right wall” is the law. Secular humanism is allowed free reign in the public square, while theism is kept tightly constrained by very narrow interpretations of the First Amendment and religious freedom.

Unfortunately, the strengths in Smith's argument for an awareness in every modern institution, particularly the university, that religion truly matters are sometimes overshadowed by his animadversions against what he considers to be a scientific hegemony in the academy. Where Smith shines in all of his previous writing is when he conceptualizes and explains significant differences in worldviews, as in his hugely popular *The World's Religions*, which I have used several times in my courses. He is nearly always able to do this in other writings in inclusive language that is at once illuminating and, at times, even inspiring. He is also admirably even-handed in his treatment of opposing religious views and secular worldviews, a quality that remains constant in all of his books. Much of his lifelong scholarship offers an amplitude of evidence in this regard. My students love the stories he tells in order to make religious commonalities and differences come to life in a sympathetic, yet real-world way.

Furthermore, in the past, my students speak glowingly of Smith's ability to draw clear and valid distinctions between and among people's religious and secular beliefs throughout the world. For example, in discussing *Why Religion Matters* in one of my courses recently, students particularly liked the following passage for its sharpness of distinction between two kinds of truth represented by reason and faith:

On the one hand are the truths of knowledge as these are derived from science and from discursive, empirically grounded reason. On the other hand are the truths that faith, religious experience, morality, meaning, and value put forward. The latter are not grounded in knowledge. They arise out of a blend of feeling, intuition, ethical action, communal convention, folk tradition, and mystical experience.⁵

Of course, the reader can quibble, as do I, over the sharp dichotomy that Smith posits between scientific and religious epistemologies. But in trying to understand why the academy generally tends to look down upon religious knowledge (except within the confines of a religious studies major) as a valid form of inquiry in *all* the disciplines, my students were able to better understand the central epistemological cleavage in the American university. This cleavage expresses itself in the ongoing split between "subject and object, fact and value, theory and practice, science and the humanities, and faith and knowledge."⁶ From Smith's perspective, the balance between reason and faith, science and religion, in higher education is unequal. Science has become monopolistic. Worse, Smith charges, in its arrogant triumphalism regarding the absolute truth of evolution, it becomes mere

scientism, simply another unsatisfying replacement for traditional forms of religion.

Even though Smith scores many powerful points against the hegemony of a so-called scientism in the academy, *Why Religion Matters*, in my opinion, is less successful when it evolves into an angry polemic. On this score, therefore, I would have to respond that no, the book will not really matter, particularly to the group whom Smith sets up as his all-powerful adversary, scientists. For the first time that I can recall in his work, Smith here loses the capaciousness of perspective and fair-mindedness that have long been his scholarly trademarks. In spite of his best efforts to be fair, and to distinguish between science (which is good) and scientism (which is bad), it is difficult not to close the book at the end of the day without thinking of scientists (who have little need for the “God hypothesis”) as the despised, oppressor class and believers (who need the “God hypothesis” in order to get through the day) as the victimized, oppressed class. One is left with the distinct impression, uttered again and again by Smith in different ways, that Darwinism has become the secular religion of the university professoriate, particularly in the hard sciences.

The whole of Chapter 4, for example, is an argument that the spirit of free inquiry in the academy has given way to a kind of doctrinal belief in natural selection and survival of the fittest. And Chapter 10, at times, becomes a diatribe against such makers of the modernist mind as Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein, in spite of the author’s attempts to offer a few gratuitous olive branches to each thinker. In my opinion, Smith totally misunderstands Freud and Nietzsche, so intent is he at imposing a modernist-postmodernist agenda on both of them.

In this regard, I remember one of my most tolerant students exclaiming in class one day that:

In my opinion, Smith’s angry critique of what he calls scientism is really a clumsy attempt to conceal his disdain for science in general. I get the impression that, in Smith’s opinion, science and religion will always be at loggerheads. I always thought that religion was meant to be a reconciling force rather than a divisive one. I always thought that the strength of religion was that it gave us answers that science knew nothing about. I don’t look to science to save my soul or to comfort me when I have to face life’s setbacks. I consider myself a conventionally trained scientist in many ways, but I also consider myself a deeply devout Presbyterian. Why is Smith starting a fight that he is bound

to lose? Why is he setting up a dualism that, in my estimation, doesn't exist?

Personally, I like the idea of compartmentalizing different ways of finding truth. In some cases, the various approaches converge, in other cases they diverge. I have become even more religious regarding my response to Smith's "big questions" as a result of studying science. I believe that God gave us the gift of reason in order to better understand how He created human beings through an evolutionary process. If Smith honestly believes that religion gets short shrift in the university, why hasn't he been more of an advocate in behalf of religion all during his long career. It seems to me that believers have to shoulder some of the blame in ceding power to scientists. As a believer, I never have, and I'm a scientist after all.

Another student, a postmodern skeptic, put her finger on what bothered her about the "religious disposition" that Smith favors. She said:

I really liked the author's Chapter 15 on "Spiritual Personality Types." He helped me to understand that even *within* religions there are atheists, polytheists, monotheists, and mystics. Pluralism is everywhere evident. But, I must confess that he lost me with his lame attempts to explain the problem of evil.⁷ When he tried to compare the gulags of Stalin, and the Holocaust of Nazism, to a child's dropping her ice-cream cone—in the sense that perhaps these tragedies are not the end of the world because God has a bigger design in mind—as a Jew, I was insulted.

And later when he quoted the professional athlete that pain and suffering occur for the sole reason that they teach us about what's really important in life, I felt that he belittled and dismissed the struggle that millions of believers have faced in trying to reconcile good and evil in Christianity and in Judaism. These pat explanations of why bad things happen to good people really drive home to me what is feeble about religion. Face it: There is no rational explanation for the presence of evil in the world. Religion, in my opinion, has been no help at all in confronting this age-old dilemma, other than providing a little false comfort.

At least science has tried to come up with a more plausible explanation: Because we live in a completely contingent universe, with no supernatural designer to guide us, shit just happens, most of it randomly. So much of what we experience by way of pain and suffering is a matter of sheer evolutionary luck—a byproduct of genetics, geography, adaptation, socialization, and a host of other biological and cultural factors, many of which are completely beyond our control. The evolutionary process is non-teleological and mostly a crapshoot. We do the best we can, and that's all there is to it.

Part 2, “The Light at the Tunnel’s End,” in spite of the author’s best efforts to reach out to scientists, still manages to cast them as religion’s implacable foes. “Light” is his dominant metaphor for reconciliation, but the unmistakable impression Smith leaves is that unless the light is experienced through what he calls the “eyes of faith,” then science has totally missed the point. Science thus becomes simply another “idol” that has failed to “tell us what we should give our lives to.”⁸ According to Smith, a reconfigured physics, biology, and cognitive science, now recast as a new type of “metaphysics,” might get us closer to the possibility that “God’s face is staring right out at us,” as Dale Kohler writes.⁹

Smith wants science and religion to work together as equal partners with one essential qualification: Science must acknowledge its limitations in answering “big picture” questions. These include values, meanings, final causes, “invisibles,” qualities, and ultimate authority. For Smith, there are “hierarchical realities,” what William James called the “eternal things,” that are the exclusive province of religion. Science must acknowledge that this “layer of reality” is as worthwhile for the academy to study as any other layer. Spirit is as real in the religious realm as matter is in the scientific realm. Smith argues that the academy must accept as equally valid the two realms of meaning, if a “détente” is ever to occur between the two historically combative camps. Unfortunately, Smith never gets around to explaining satisfactorily, at least to me, just why religion is more qualified than science to answer “big picture” questions. Furthermore, he fails to make clear just why science would ever willingly agree to confine its investigations to what he so obviously considers to be “little picture” questions. What discipline would be content to publicly narrow its investigations in such a way?

From where I sit, the picture is at once far more complex and far more hopeful than Smith paints it. Accounts of recent attempts to discover a science-religion rapprochement are actually becoming more common in the

academy. For example, the John Templeton Foundation spends fourteen-million dollars annually on interdisciplinary science-and-religion courses and scholarly conferences, as well as sponsoring a wide range of cooperative research efforts. Moreover, the Center for Theology & the Natural Sciences, founded in 1981, in Berkeley, California, is directed by a scholar, Robert John Russell, who is both a scientist and a Christian. Scientists come together with theologians at the Center to explore the possibility of a “not-so-random universe.” Conversations at these gatherings are often heated, frequently polarized and unsettled, but always respectful and civil. Furthermore, evangelical scholarly publications such as *Books & Culture* and *Intervarsity Press* are increasingly sponsoring works that explore creative ways to deepen and enrich the religious worldview by incorporating unorthodox secular ideas from postmodern theory. John Milbank, a professor at the University of Virginia and an evangelical Methodist, refers to this new theological movement as “radical orthodoxy,” an attempt to integrate the logic of postmodern secularism and the logic of the sacred.

More importantly, however, I believe that, despite their disciplinary and philosophical differences, most faculty, like their students, are inescapably engaged in a search for meaning, even on Smith’s terms. Most faculty, whatever their backgrounds, must inevitably come to terms with what Smith calls the “ultimate questions,” questions that all human beings might very well be genetically programmed to ask. Ironically, some hardcore scientists are themselves starting to argue this point. Moreover, most faculty members whom I know are acutely aware that these insistent “big picture” questions are unanswerable because, in the end, they are simply beyond the domains of the natural sciences, the social sciences, and even, to some extent, the humanities, including religious studies. After all, how can these disciplines ever provide satisfying answers to what philosophers call “zero-level” inquiries about the ultimate meaning of existence? Why would they even want to?

As much as I admire Huston Smith, I think that too often he comes down on the easy side of a watery understanding of religion. I miss in *Why Religion Matters* an awareness of the profound tension that will always exist between the faith of the mystic and the reason of a scientist, a tension that will forever resist a factitious “détente.” Ironically, in spite of his encyclopedic knowledge of the world’s religions, Smith’s answers in this volume appear to be too simplistic for a humanity that must live amidst the confounding complexities of a postmodern age. Smith completely avoids the point that we need both faith and reason, religion and science, intuition and cognition, in order to answer such big questions as the meaning of evil in a world allegedly created by an all-powerful, loving Creator. The dilemma of

clinging to a faith in some ultimate meaning which reason is unable to support represents what the Spanish philosopher, Unamuno, once called the “tragic sense of life.” Smith seems to have forgotten that we are doomed to live forever ensnared in this unresolvable tension, whenever we appeal to either faith or reason as the exclusive answer to life’s tragic enigmas.

Finally, I have found in my own personal experience that even allowing for the presence of the inevitable dogmatists at the furthest ends of the science-religion continuum, many faculty whom I have encountered in the academy refuse to succumb to the easy temptations of religio-phobia. Even the more hard-bitten skeptics I have met, with a few notable exceptions, try very hard to maintain an open mind on questions of religion and values. The vast majority of scholars I know are simply unwilling to discredit a student’s genuine quest for knowledge, even when it veers off in a religious or spiritual direction, and even if that direction is resolutely orthodox. Perhaps I am an incurable optimist, but, I believe that Smith himself, despite the occasional petulance in *Why Religion Matters*, says it best in his epilogue: “We could [all] be siblings yet.”¹⁰ My fear, however, is that Smith’s sometimes cranky book will only intensify the type of sibling rivalry in the academy that has ended up producing what C.P. Snow once called “two [unbridgable] cultures.”

Notes

1. Smith, H. *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. (New York:HarperCollins, 2001), 217.
2. *Ibid.*, 28.
3. *Ibid.*, 15.
4. *Ibid.*, 48.
5. *Ibid.*, 100.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 254.
8. *Ibid.*, 152-3.
9. *Ibid.*, 177.
10. *Ibid.*, 271.

Robert J. Nash’s *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*, recently published by Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., is available through Amazon.com or by contacting Peter Lang Publishing Customer Service at 800.770.5264.