

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

The search for the Real

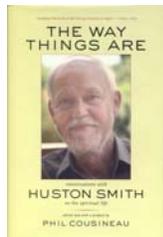


How do you define religion? Huston Smith, a lifelong Methodist and perhaps today's leading authority on the world's religions, says, "Religion is for me the search for the Real, and the effort to approximate one's life to it." That's close to what it is for me too—the search for "the way things are" and for how to get in sync with that, in the way most beneficial to myself, others, and the wider world.

Smith defines faith as "the choice of the most meaningful hypothesis," and I can also identify with that. We Christians describe "the Real" largely in terms of what we see in Jesus and read in the Bible, and we call it "God," while followers of other religions give it other names and describe it in somewhat different ways. Because we're finite, however, none of us can know for sure exactly what "the Real" is like, or know all that it includes. Our faith is therefore what we've chosen as the most convincing beliefs we've seen to choose from.

A lifelong spiritual quest

Many of Huston Smith's views appear in the book *The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith on the Spiritual Life*, edited and with a preface by Phil Cousineau (University of California Press, 2003). Its contents come from essays by Smith and interviews with him.



Smith was born in 1919 to Methodist missionary parents in China. At seventeen he came to the U.S. to study for the ordained ministry but changed to teaching. His intellectual quest became a spiritual quest focused on reconciling science and religion, which he sees as having been the most powerful forces in history.



We trust science too little and too much

In modern Christianity Huston Smith sees two mistaken reactions to the findings of science. One reaction ignores them and takes the Bible's statements about the physical world literally. It seems to me that this is one of the serious mistakes today's so-called Christian conservatives make. In ignoring research about biblical documents, and in claiming that biblical creation stories accurately describe the physical world and that statements about virgin birth and bodily resurrection portray physical events, these Christians unwisely ignore what we've learned through science.



The second mistaken reaction to science is the opposite of the first. Instead of refusing to believe what science has discovered, this approach assumes that science can discover the truth about everything. Huston Smith calls this attitude "scientism." It's the belief that the scientific approach to truth is the only reliable one, and that the realities science turns up are the only true realities.

Science has limits

The fallacy in scientism, Smith finds, comes from the fact that the crux of the scientific method is the controlled experiment. We can control only what is inferior to us. "There is no way," Smith reminds us, "that we are going to get angels, or God, or whatever other beings there may be that are greater than we are, into our controlled experiments."



Science is ideal for finding the structure of this world but it can't find the reality of another world, which religion deals with. Science can't discover values, purposes, and meanings. It can deal only with quantities, not qualities.

In Huston Smith's view, to learn about the material world we should rely on science. Unfortunately, however, it has become the revelation of our time, and scientists the priests of our day. We have come to assume that science is the only reliable way of getting at the truth about everything, and that nothing exists except what science tells us about. That assumption gives science power that's not justified.

A common spine

In the course of this quest, Cousineau tells us, Smith has practiced yoga with Hindu gurus in India, meditated with Zen masters in Japan, prayed with Buddhist monks in Burma, danced with Sufi dervishes in Iran, and experienced the spiritual practices of numerous other religions with their adherents throughout the world. He doesn't recommend this for everyone but feels it has been his calling.



In the outlooks of most tribes, civilizations, and religions, Smith sees what he calls a common conceptual spine—a primordial tradition that is universal. He prefers to call all these outlooks “wisdom traditions,” though he recognizes that not everything in them is wise. In contrast, he thinks of “religion”



as their institutional aspects, which are always, he finds, “a mixed bag.” Their science, especially, is antiquated and shouldn't be taken literally.

We are in good hands

Smith still worships regularly in his local Methodist church when he is home, and he's still a Christian. Why? “This is the tradition I was born in, that feels natural to me.” Besides, he says, in all his studies he has found nothing to suggest that any other tradition is superior to it.



Smith finds, however, that what comes through to many Christians from their upbringing is dogmatism—“we have the truth and everybody else is going to hell”—and moralism—“don't do this, that, and the other.” What came through to him was very different—“we are in good hands, and in gratitude for that fact it would be good if we bore one another's burdens.” How do you feel about his not mentioning that Jesus gives salvation from sin, as the main message he got from Christianity? What's the message you've gotten?

Different ways of describing God



Besides leading Huston Smith to conclusions about the relationship between religion and science, his lifelong spiritual quest has shown him that

differences in temperament lead people to different ways of describing what they see as the Absolute, the Real, the way things are, or whatever other name they may give to the ultimate meaning in life, to which Christians give the name God.

EXoteric

By definition the Absolute is infinite and thus formless. For most people, that presents a problem in understanding, Huston Smith finds, because to most people, formlessness means lack. Smith calls these people exoterics. The notion of formlessness and of something that can't be put into words simply doesn't connect with them. Their lives are completely contained in the world of forms. They see anything formless as incomplete and not fully real. To them, things without nameable properties are simply nothing.

Other people, however, see formlessness as more real and more complete than the world of forms. Smith gives these people a different name, esoterics. They see reality overflowing its formal containers into formlessness. Esoterics see that the Absolute is infinite and all forms are finite, so logically, the Absolute can't be contained in any form. But for esoterics, formlessness is not only something they infer logically. It is a reality they experience.

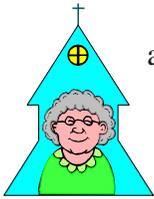
ESoteric

Enticing to some, repellent to others

The notion of the infinite, Smith observes, is positive and even enticing to esoterics. Their response to it is affirmative and embracing. This view, however, is incomprehensible to exoterics. Their minds are rebuffed by it. To them it's meaningless at best and frightening at worst.

Esoterics see the Absolute as indefinable, but they recognize that as finite humans we need indications of what the Absolute is like. The great religious revelations provide that. Esoterics can therefore endorse them as alternative voices in which the Absolute speaks in order to be understood by different hearers. Esoterics see that the infinite must exceed all forms, but they recognize forms as pointing toward the infinite and therefore useful. Smith thinks esoterics are best at seeing the relationship between religions, because an esoteric core is common to all religions.

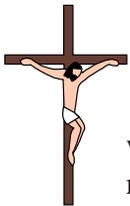




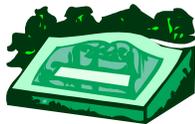
Exoterics more closely, more literally, and apparently more willingly and happily as well, follow the specifics that their tradition gives them. For exoterics, Smith feels, seeing one tradition as preeminent is not only inevitable but appropriate. They have more problems than esoterics, however, living where they can't avoid being aware of other traditions and are asked to give other traditions equal rights with their own.

No monopoly on sanctity

Smith finds that esoterics are always a minority. He's part of it and I am too, so I found his description of it not only recognizable but also encouraging. Like other Christians whose understanding of Christianity differs in some ways from the majority, Christian esoterics sometimes get labeled as faithless or even as heretical. But Smith assures us that neither esoterics nor exoterics have a monopoly on sanctity. In his view, the esoteric position is more profound than the exoteric, but a good exoteric can reach salvation just as well as a good esoteric.



The book *The Way Things Are* isn't a systematic or complete presentation of Smith's views, however, and part of what it doesn't tell is exactly what Smith understands salvation to mean. He says there's a primordial tradition underlying the religions' varied beliefs about it. The common theme coming from this tradition, in his view, is that the death of the body is not the end of consciousness, and that consciousness can eventually attain beatitude. The variations relate to whether that happens on this plane of our existence or on other planes.



Four different paths

In the world's major religions, Huston Smith sees several ways of describing different people's routes to God. Smith finds especially helpful the way in which Hinduism distinguishes four paths: love, knowledge, work, and meditation. Of these, he sees Christianity mainly stressing the path of love. He attributes that to Christianity's emphasis on loving Christ, however, instead of to Jesus's command to love one another, which I found surprising.



Smith observes that the path of knowledge rather than love is the main path of many Christians, and he finds that his own best path. But this knowledge is not mere rational knowledge. It has nothing to do with having a quantity of information or logical dexterity. Rather it is an intuitive awareness,



a discernment of the way things are. It is often misunderstood, Smith sees, by those who have not experienced it and whose strengths lie elsewhere.

Four spiritual temperaments

Huston Smith feels that the four paths of Hinduism relate to personality or temperament types. They cut across all religious traditions and to him seem similar to the personality types Carl Jung described. In Smith's view, people with strong emotions do best to focus on loving God, while those who are inclined toward reflection lean toward knowing God. The actively inclined tend toward serving God, he thinks, while experimenters make good meditators.

He also sees spiritual personality types reflected in four beliefs about the nature of the Absolute. For atheists, he explains, the obvious or the mundane is all there is. Polytheists understand the Absolute in

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

terms of concrete spirits, while for monotheists, everything comes together in a single universal being that is personal. Mystics also recognize a world spirit, but they find personal imagery too restrictive.

According to Phil Cousineau, editor of *The Way Things Are*, Huston Smith has an essentially mystic vision of religion as the essential civilizing force in human affairs. Smith defines a mystic as someone whose whole being is rooted in an alternate, wider, more inclusive reality. The mystic sees objective facts as symbols, and sees that almost anything can be a symbol of the divine.



No way to confine the Spirit

Whether or not we find these particular descriptions accurate, it's important to remember that we don't all come to God by the same route. "There is no way one can confine the spirit," Huston Smith finds, "and say to it, 'You can manifest only in these structures and not in others.'"

I wish we'd remember that more often in the church.



Barbara



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

The search for the Real

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How can we hold our truth to be the Truth?



Huston Smith finds that the longing for ultimate meaning and the promise of its fulfillment are at the heart of all religion. He observes that not only religion but also all great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, and psychology are trying to name and analyze this longing. "People have a profound need," Smith finds, "to believe that the truth they perceive is rooted in the unchanging depths of the universe." In trying to find that kind of truth, however, we encounter a problem—"How can we hold our truth to be the Truth when others see the truth so differently?"

As a Christian, how do you answer that question?

What's your spiritual temperament?

The book *The Way Things Are* describes Huston Smith's impressions of differences in spiritual personality types or temperaments that seem to influence how people experience God and become aware of God's presence. Intuitive knowledge or discernment is Smith's best route to God, and it's mine too.

What's yours? Are you attracted mainly to loving Christ and showing love to others? Are you drawn to ideas rather than an intense personal relationship with Jesus? Do you focus mainly on serving God? Is meditation a helpful route to God for you? How do you relate to others whose path is different from yours?

