

Celebrating Huston Smith

Tales of Wonder and the process art of building community

- An introduction to a conversation
- *The World's Religions* – an excerpt
- Some initial ideas
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Brandon WilliamsCraig here. I was introduced to Huston Smith by a student at Aikido of Berkeley, Richard Page, who owns Conference Recording Service. For thirty years Richard has been audio and video recording and getting to know some of the most amazing people of this era. After the gift of Richard's introduction, Huston and I shared lunches, afternoon teas, and excellent conversations about our shared enthusiasms for creatures of all descriptions and their ways of being, religion, mythology, and the liberal arts in general. Here are the words with which I hope to begin our public conversations.

If, as you confess in your new autobiography, you are not a scholar of religions, then what are you? It seems you are a maker and teller of *Tales of Wonder*, and have learned to communicate how chasing big mysteries can be a life's adventure. Your writing continues to fascinate. Your scholarship and tales step beyond scholarly reporting to ask for specific responses that have influenced interrelated and peaceful communities around the world, taking all beings seriously and treating each other with compassion. Let us be grateful for the exposure to wonderful tales but take you seriously as well and not stop with admiration.

From my exposure to a range of amazing individuals whose thought and work are seen as particularly worth following, it seems that the mark of a master teacher has to do with making it seem not only possible but compelling to seek like they sought. If that is so, *how* you communicate your ideas is as essential as the message you offer, and your way of practicing what you preach seems to some degree replicable. I will always want to hear more of your stories and hope you will tell several here. While listening, I would also like to learn more from you, as though learning about your process—your art form: encountering the world's traditions in the people with whom you make such beautiful relationships, and then drawing your readers and students into that global community of faith.

Please keep telling us tales, but also how you approach the world view they suggest. Please tell us a bit about the places you have seen the kind of attention that makes the process of chasing understanding in relationship an art so that we may do as you have done: experiment with ways of being and consider each other's mysteries compassionately, with seriousness and joy, thereby investing in a mythology or world-view which deeply desires peace and is always building Community.

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Would you like to begin with an excursion, or with my asking a question, or in some other way you feel moved?

If you'd like to move to the text, since your autobiography is so new, today we will use an excerpt from *The World's Religions* to leap into consideration of your *Tales of Wonder*, and generate questions here and at abcglobal.net while we are following your thinking and doing some more reading before next week.

An excerpt from *The World's Religions* "A Point of Departure" pp 6-8

We live in a fantastic century. I brush aside the incredible discoveries of science, and the razor's edge between doom and fulfillment onto which they have pushed us, to speak of the new situation among peoples. Lands across the planet have become our neighbors, China across the street, the Middle East at our back door. Young people with backpacks are everywhere, and those who remain at home are treated to an endless parade of books, documentaries, and visitors from abroad. We hear that East and West are meeting, but it is an understatement. They are being flung at one another, hurled with the force of atoms, the speed of jets, the restlessness of minds impatient to learn the ways of others. When historians look back on our century, they may remember it most, not for space travel or the release of nuclear energy, but as the time when the peoples of the world first came to take one another seriously.

The change that this new situation requires of us all—we who have been suddenly catapulted from town and country onto a world stage—is staggering. Twenty-five hundred years ago it took an exceptional man like Diogenes to exclaim, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world." Today we must all be struggling to make those words our own. We have come to the point in history when anyone who is only Japanese or American, only Oriental or Occidental, is only half human. The other half that beats with the pulse of all humanity has yet to be born.

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To borrow an image from Nietzsche, we have all been summoned to become Cosmic Dancers who do not rest heavily on a single spot but lightly turn and leap from one position to another. As World Citizen, the Cosmic Dancer will be an authentic child of its parent culture, while closely related to all. The dancer's roots in family and community will be deep, but in those depths they will strike the water table of common humanity. For is the dancer not also human? If only she might see what has interested others, might it not interest her as well? It is an exciting prospect. The softening of divisions will induce borrowings that sometimes produce hybrids, but for the most part simply enrich species and sustain their vigor.

The motives that impel us toward world understanding are varied. I was once taxied by bomber to an air force base to lecture to officers on other people's faiths. Why? Obviously, because those officers might some day have to deal with those peoples as allies or antagonists. This is one reason for coming to know them. It may be a necessary reason, but one hopes there are others. Even the goal of avoiding military engagement through diplomacy is provisional because instrumental. The final reason for understanding another is intrinsic—to enjoy the wider angle the vision affords.

I am, of course, speaking metaphorically of vision and view, but an analogue from ocular sight fits perfectly. Without two eyes—binocular vision—there is no awareness of space's third dimension. Until sight converges from more than one angle, the world looks as flat as a postcard. The rewards of having two eyes are practical; they keep us from bumping into chairs and enable us to judge the speed of approaching cars. But the final reward is the deepened view of the world itself—the panoramas that unroll before us, the vistas that extend from our feet. It is the same with "the eye of the soul," as Plato called it. "What do they know of England, who only England know?"

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Initial ideas

First I need to ask a permission, that I be allowed to use words like “Myth” and “**mythology**” in the way that the field of Mythological Studies uses them, never to dismiss other people’s belief as quaint illusion but as an indicator of the ideas all human beings string together to make theories and tell stories about the way their cosmos works. “Mythology” means to us **world-view** expressed in ideas, images, and language. Second, others may do as they like but I will at no time be speaking of God in a literal sense, **only about human ideas**, without making any claims or drawing any conclusions about an object of anyone’s faith. Lastly, when I say “**process arts**” I mean the kinds of facilitation that pay attention to large and small world-views, or mythologies—to the ways relationships are coming together between people, as a teller of stories about religion might practice his craft by inviting children to sit on the floor to learn about Japanese tradition because doing so honors both the audience and the material, the bodies in the room and the body of work, in a way that will facilitate the learning.

Potential Questions

Will be generated on the ABC Facebook group and website at
http://abcglobal.net/Ideas_and_Fictions/Themes/Questions

References and Resources

If you would like your work listed on the *References and Resources* guide to be handed out at the second event on July 12th, please send me an email (to public at bdwc dot net) after going to your User Page (click on your own name after signing in) at <http://abcglobal.net> and listing the words you would like to appear in the following format: name (yours or an organization) and URL; one brief paragraph about what you do in terms of world-view and mission; contact info.

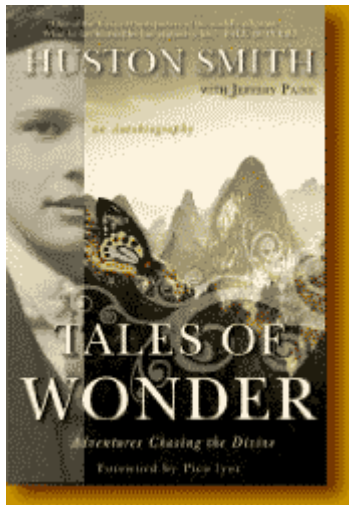
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Some of Huston Smith's published work (a reproduction from his website)

Tales of Wonder

From HarperCollins [Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine, an Autobiography](#) by Huston Smith with [Jeffery Paine](#).



Huston Smith, the man who brought the world's religions to the West, was born almost a century ago to missionary parents in China during the perilous rise of the Communist Party. Smith's lifelong spiritual journey brought him face-to-face with many of the people who shaped the twentieth century. His extraordinary travels around the globe have taken him to the world's holiest places, where he has practiced religion with many of the great spiritual leaders of our time.

Smith's life is a story of uncanny synchronicity. He was there for pivotal moments in human history such as the founding of the United Nations and the student uprising at Tiananmen Square. As he traveled the world he encountered thinkers who shaped the twentieth century. He interviewed Eleanor Roosevelt on the radio; invited Martin Luther King Jr. to speak at an all-white university before the March on Washington; shared ideas with Thomas Merton on his last plane ride before Merton's death in Bangkok; and was rescued while lost in the Serengeti by Masai warriors who took him to the compound of world-renowned anthropologists Louis and Mary Leaky.

In search of intellectual and spiritual treasures, Smith traveled to India to meet with Mother Teresa and befriended the Dalai Lama; he studied Zen at the most challenging monastery in Japan; and he hitchhiked through the desert to meet Aldous Huxley, dropped acid with Timothy Leary, and took peyote with a Native American shaman. He climbed Mount Athos, traipsed through the Holy Land, and was the first to study multiphonic chanting by monks in Tibet, which he recorded with Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead. Most important, he shared the world's religions with the West—writing two bestselling books and serving as the focus of a five-part PBS television series by Bill Moyers.

Huston Smith is a national treasure. His life is an extraordinary adventure, and in his amazing *Tales of Wonder*, he invites you to come along to explore your own vistas of heart, mind, and soul.

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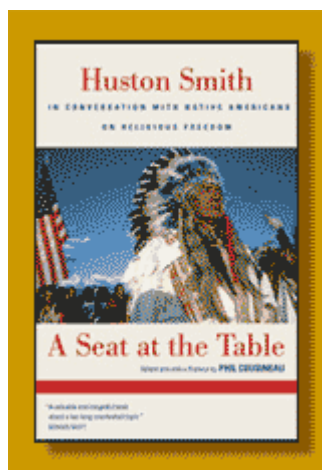
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A SEAT AT THE TABLE

HUSTON SMITH IN CONVERSATION WITH NATIVE AMERICANS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
EDITED AND WITH A PREFACE BY PHIL COUSINEAU, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM GARY RHINE

"AN ENGAGING DISCUSSION OF THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WESTERN AND NATIVE AMERICAN APPROACHES TO WORSHIP AND MORALITY, AND A CALL FOR AMERICAN SOCIETY TO WAKE UP TO ITS DESTRUCTIVE WAYS."--*DALLAS MORNING NEWS*

"Offers plenty to think about to readers unfamiliar with the many and varied issues facing American Indians."--*Santa Fe New Mexican*



"*A Seat At The Table* is a valuable and insightful book about a too long overlooked topic - the right of Native American people to have their sacred sites and practices honored and protected. Let's hope it gets read far and wide, enough to bring about a real shift in policy and consciousness."--Bonnie Raitt

"Phil Cousineau has created a fine companion book to accompany the important film he and Gary Rhine have made in defense of the religious traditions of Native Americans. [Native Americans] are recognized the world over as keepers of a vital piece of the Creator's original orders, and yet they are regarded as little more than squatters at home. This book features impressive interviews, beautiful illustrations, and gives a voice to the voiceless."--Peter Coyote

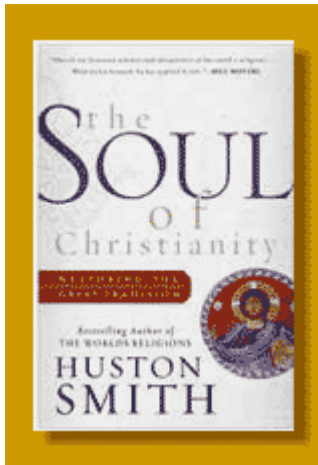
In this collection of illuminating conversations, renowned historian of world religions Huston Smith invites ten influential American Indian spiritual and political leaders to talk about their five-hundred-year struggle for religious freedom. Their intimate, impassioned dialogues yield profound insights into one of the most striking cases of tragic irony in history: the country that prides itself on religious freedom has resolutely denied those same rights to its own indigenous people. With remarkable erudition and curiosity--and respectfully framing his questions in light of the revelation that his discovery of Native American religion helped him round out his views of the world's religions--Smith skillfully helps reveal the depth of the speakers' knowledge and experience. American Indian leaders Vine Deloria, Jr. (Lakota), Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe), Walter Echo-Hawk (Pawnee), Frank Dayish, Jr. (Navajo), Charlotte Black Elk (Lakota), Douglas George-Kanentiio (Mohawk), Lenny Foster (Dine), Tonya Gonnella Frichner (Onondaga), Anthony Guy Lopez (Lakota), and Oren Lyons (Onondaga) provide an impressive overview of the critical issues facing the Native American

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community today. Their ideas about spirituality, politics, relations with the U.S. government, their place in American society, and the continuing vitality of their communities give voice to a population that is all too often ignored in contemporary discourse. The culture they describe is not a relic of the past, nor a historical curiosity, but a living tradition that continues to shape Native American lives.

The Soul of Christianity : Restoring the Great Tradition



"I have tried to describe a Christianity which is fully compatible with everything we now know, and to indicate why Christians feel privileged to give their lives to it."

-Huston Smith

In his most personal and passionate book on the spiritual life, renowned author, scholar, and teacher of world religions Huston Smith turns to his own life-long religion, Christianity. With stories and personal anecdotes, Smith not only presents the basic beliefs and essential teachings of Christianity, but argues why religious belief matters in today's secular world.

Though there is a wide variety of contemporary interpretations of Christianity -- some of them conflicting -- Smith cuts through these to describe Christianity's "Great Tradition," the common faith of the first millennium of believers, which is the trunk of the tree from which Christianity's many branches, twigs, and leaves have grown. This is not the exclusivist Christianity of strict fundamentalists, nor the liberal, watered-down Christianity practiced by many contemporary churchgoers. In exposing biblical literalism as unworkable as well as enumerating the mistakes of modern secularists, Smith presents the very soul of a real and substantive faith, one still relevant and worth believing in.

Smith rails against the hijacked Christianity of politicians who exploit it for their own needs. He decries the exercise of business that widens the gap between rich and poor, and fears education has lost its sense of direction. For Smith, the media has become a business that sensationalizes news rather than broadening our understanding, and art and music have become commercial and shocking rather than enlightening. Smith reserves his harshest condemnation, however, for secular modernity, which has stemmed from the misreading of science -- the mistake of assuming that "absence of evidence" of a scientific nature is "evidence of absence." These mistakes have all but banished faith in transcendence and the Divine from mainstream culture and pushed it to the margins.

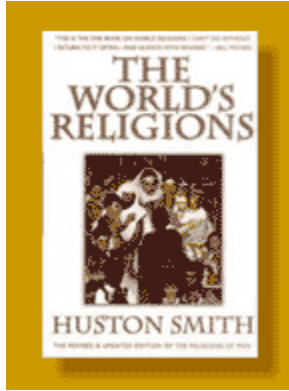
Though the situation is grave, these modern misapprehensions can be corrected, says Smith, by reexamining the great tradition of Christianity's first millennium and reaping the lessons it holds for us today. This fresh examination of the Christian worldview, its history, and

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its major branches provides the deepest, most authentic vision of Christianity -- one that is both tolerant and substantial, traditional and relevant.

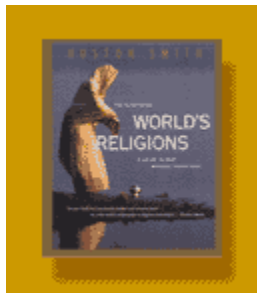
THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS



The World's Religions, by Huston Smith, has been a standard introduction to its eponymous subject since its first publication in 1958. Smith writes humbly, forswearing judgment on the validity of world religions. His introduction asks, "How does it all sound from above? Like bedlam, or do the strains blend in strange, ethereal harmony? ... We cannot know. All we can do is try to listen carefully and with full attention to each voice in turn as it addresses the divine. Such listening defines the purpose of this book." His criteria for inclusion and analysis of religions in this book are "relevance to the modern mind" and "universality," and his interest in each religion is more concerned with its principles than its context. Therefore, he avoids cataloging the horrors and crimes of which religions have been accused, and he attempts to show each "at their best." Yet *The World's Religions* is no pollyannaish romp: "It is about religion alive," Huston writes. "It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a proposed journey across the jungles, peaks, and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality." And by translating the voices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, and Judaism, among others, Smith has amplified the divine call for generations of readers.

--Michael Joseph Gross

THE ILLUSTRATED WORLD'S RELIGIONS : A GUIDE TO OUR WISDOM TRADITIONS

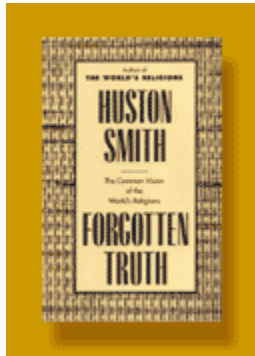


Retaining all the beloved qualities of Huston Smith's classic *The Religions of Man* and the current fully revised and updated *The World's Religions*, this stunning pictorial presentation refines the text to its wonderful essentials. In detailed, absorbing, richly illustrated, and highly readable chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and primal religions, we find refreshing and fascinating presentations of both the differences and the similarities among the worldwide religious traditions.

The approach is at once classic and contemporary, retaining all the empathy, eloquence and erudition that millions of readers love about the earlier editions, while being edited and designed for a contemporary general readership. This delightful marriage of winsome text and remarkable pictures vividly brings to life the scope and vision of Huston Smith's expertise and insight

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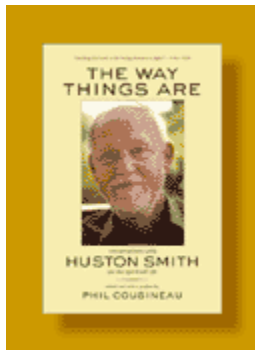


FORGOTTEN TRUTH : THE COMMON VISION OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

Ingram

The classic companion to *The World's Religions* that articulates the remarkable unity underlying the world's religious traditions. "Smith's style reflects his subject; he is by turns a mystic sage, a poet, and above all a philosopher."--Publishers Weekly. Includes a new preface by the author.

THE WAY THINGS ARE



Working with **Phil Cousineau**, Smith has recently completed a collection of over thirty interviews he has given over the last four decades. This book will reveal the roots of Smith's search for the fundamental mystical truths at the heart of religion.

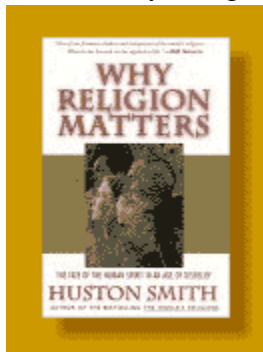
From Publishers Weekly

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that he would gladly walk 100 miles through a snowstorm for one good conversation. Fortunately, readers don't have to trudge through a blizzard or even leave their armchairs to listen in on these 22 fascinating conversations with renowned religious scholar Huston Smith. Kudos to editor and accomplished author Cousineau (*The Art of Pilgrimage*) for gathering these interviews that span more than 30 years. Readers will find themselves ravenously eavesdropping on captivating discussions, such as Smith's humorous story of meeting His Holiness the Dalai Lama for the first time or his soothing anecdote of how he became spiritually reconciled to the death of his eldest daughter to cancer. When Smith speaks about religious violence, his insight could be relevant to any era of humanity: "First of all, my persuasion is what really breeds violence is political differences. But because religion serves as the soul of community, it gets drawn into the fracas and turns up the heat." Indeed, a lifelong career of studying the world's religions has made him especially gifted in illuminating the dialogues that are timeless. As a result, his conversations touch upon many Big Questions: what is the meaning of God? Where do science and religion meet? How can we teach children about the sacred in everyday life? Why do we move toward the light? Incidentally, Cousineau's stunning preface is worth the price of admission alone.

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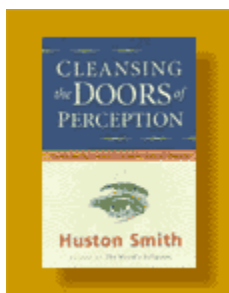
Why Religion Matters



Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief, offers a timely manifesto on the urgent need to restore the role of religion as the primary humanizing force for individuals and society. Weaving together insights from comparative religions, theology, philosophy, science, and history, along with examples drawn from current events and his own extraordinary personal experience, Smith gives both a convincing historical and social critique and a profound expression of hope for the spiritual condition of humanity. Despite the widespread belief that these are halcyon days for religion and spiritual awareness, Smith shows how our everyday worldview is instead dominated by a narrow scientism, materialism, and consumerism that push issues of morality, meaning, and truth to the outer margins of society and our lives. In fact, he finds that too much of what passes as religion these days is actually a privatized and ungrounded debasement of true religion.

Why Religion Matters is a passionate, accessible, ambitious manifesto written by one of the very few people qualified to address its titular topic. Huston Smith is the grand old man of religious scholarship. Raised by missionary parents in China, Smith went on to teach at M.I.T. and U.C. Berkeley, among others, and his *World's Religions* has long been the standard introductory textbook for college religion courses. The subject of **Why Religion Matters**, Smith writes, "is the importance of the religious dimension of human life--in individuals, in societies, and in civilizations." Smith believes that the religious dimension of human life has been devalued by the rise of modern science: we have now reached a point at which "modern Westerners . . . forsaking clear thinking, have allowed ourselves to become so obsessed with life's material underpinnings that we have written science a blank check ... concerning what constitutes knowledge and justified belief." In candid, direct style, Smith describes the evolution of intellectual history from pre-modern to postmodern times, and the spiritual sensibilities that have been shunted "by our misreading of modern science." In the book's final sections, Smith avoids the folly of predicting the future, instead focusing on "features of the religious landscape that are invariant" and therefore may serve as "a map that can orient us, wherever the future may bring." This book is fresh, insightful, and important. It may prove to be as influential in shifting readers' terms of religious understanding as any of Smith's previous writings. --Paul Power

CLEANSING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION



Cleansing the Doors of Perception is a fresh consideration of the age-old relationship between certain psychoactive plants and chemicals and mystical experience by one of the most trustworthy religious writers of our time. Author Huston Smith (most famous for his classic *The World's Religions*) is the Walter Cronkite of religion scholars. He has long believed that "drugs appear to be able to induce religious experiences" and that "it is less evident that they can produce religious lives." At the same time, he posits that "if ... religion cannot be equated with religious experiences, neither can it long survive their absence." Therefore, Smith's basic question about entheogens (a word he defines as

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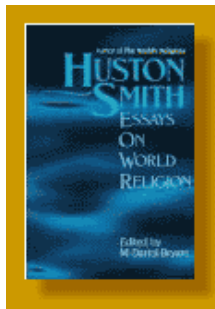
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"nonaddictive mind-altering substances that are approached seriously and reverently") is "whether chemical substances can be helpful adjuncts to faith." *Cleansing the Doors* does not offer one sustained argument in response to that question. Instead, the book collects Smith's many articles about this subject, and connects them with brief introductory essays. The writings gathered here range from personal testimony about Smith's own experience with entheogens to ethnographic work on the use of entheogens in India. Throughout, Smith's style conveys the wisdom and wonder that has guided his explorations of this strange, fascinating aspect of religious experience. --Michael Joseph Gross

Published in association with the Council on Spiritual Practices, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* is a fascinating inquiry in the significance of consciousness-magnifying substances. Smith combines historical insight, personal experience, and an understanding of the cognitive sciences to produce the only comprehensive book written for the general public on the mysterious relation among entheogens, consciousness, and faith.

HUSTON SMITH: ESSAYS ON WORLD RELIGION

by M. Darrol Bryant (Editor), Huston Smith From Publishers Weekly



Marked by clarity, rare philosophical depth and a truly global perspective, these 19 essays in comparative religion are filled with challenging ideas and bold speculations. Smith (*The Religions of Man*) argues that each of the world's three great civilizations has overspecialized--the West in natural wisdom, China in social ethics, India in religious psychology--with disastrous consequences for each culture. He looks to Taoism for guidance in solving the ecological crisis, faults postmodernism for its blindness to transcendent experience, and interprets Western philosophy as a great religious enterprise fueled by a thrust toward transcendence. On a more mundane level, Smith discusses spiritual discipline in Zen, analyzes Tibetan lamas' chants and offers insights on Japanese Shintoism, the Christian ecumenical movement, ancient Vedic priests' imbibing of soma (possibly a psychedelic mushroom, he concludes) and how to teach religion. These highly accessible essays previously appeared in scholarly journals or books.

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From Library Journal

Many scholars of religion began their studies by reading Smith's *The Religions of Man* (1964). His essays, previously scattered in numerous hard-to-find journals, are finally available in one convenient volume. The 19 pieces collected here delineate the three-decade intellectual journey of a scholar directly involved in the quest for religious knowledge. Eclectic and rich in scope, the subject matter ranges from Taoism and ecology, the Vedic-Soma experience, Tibetan magical chanting, and the treatment of Western philosophies as religions to the impact of postmodernism on the study of religions. All the essays are tightly argued and beautifully written; a few are sure to be controversial. A perfect companion to *The Religions of Man* and necessary reading for

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anyone interested in religious studies. Recommended for public and academic libraries.

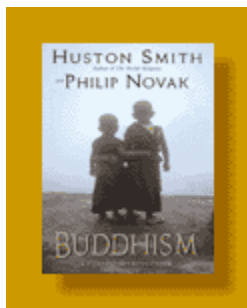
- Glenn Masuchika, Chaminade Univ. Lib., Honolulu

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Ingram

In this challenging and provocative collection of 19 essays on comparative philosophy, religion and culture, one of the foremost thinkers of our time provides his most insightful and important reflections on the state of humans' spiritual life. "Eclectic and rich in scope . . . tightly argued and beautifully written."--Library Journal.

BUDDHISM : A CONCISE INTRODUCTION BY HUSTON SMITH & PHILIP NOVAK

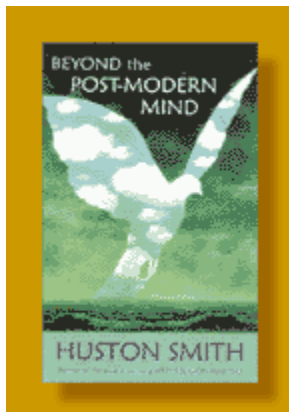


From **Publishers Weekly**

Bookshelves abound with introductions to Buddhism, many written by luminaries and spiritual giants of the faith. But this primer co-written by Smith, whose magnum opus *The World's Religions* has sold more than two million copies, is distinguished by its gentlemanly erudition and thoughtful attention to Buddhist diversity. The book's first half is an expanded and updated version of the Buddhism sections of *The World's Religions* and was penned by Smith. Special attention is given to Theravada Buddhism, which "was overshadowed by Mahayana" in the original version; one chapter provides a helpful side-by-side chart illuminating the basic differences between the traditions, while the next features an in-depth discussion of Theravada's influence in South Asia and its emphasis on insight meditation. The primer's all-new second half—written by Smith's former doctoral student Novak—presents the story of Buddhism in the West, discussing its multifaceted presence in the United States. While Novak devotes time to the rise of Buddhism in Germany, England and France, it is clear that he finds the "New Buddhism" of America, with its emphasis on lay involvement, social engagement and the cross-pollination between Buddhist traditions, to be the source of the most exciting contemporary innovations. Smith's helpful afterword gauges the rising importance of Pure Land Buddhism in America, though this vital information should have merited a full chapter. Novak and Smith's collaboration is a fine contribution to the admittedly crowded corpus of introductions to Buddhism: the strokes are broad, the writing style engaging and the chapters short and accessible.

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BEYOND THE POST-MODERN MIND: THE PLACE OF MEANING IN A GLOBAL CIVILIZATION



"Rationalism and Newtonian science has lured us into dark woods," says Huston Smith, "but a new metaphysics can rescue us." In this new revised edition, Smith explores the "dark woods"—modernity—which can be characterized by a loss of faith in transcendence. Through his fourteen critically acclaimed essays, he invites us to step outside our current Western outlook to see our worldview in perspective. He distinguishes between the "traditional" worldview that placed God at the

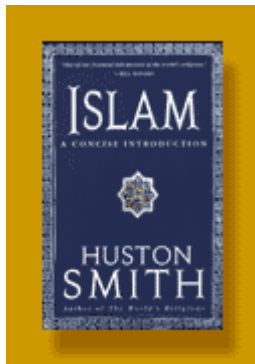
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center of the universe; the "modern" view in which science ruled; and the "postmodern" view that doubts whether the universe makes sense at all.

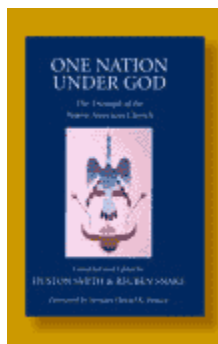
Smith begins by tracing the course of Western civilization that has brought it to the postmodern period. This enables him to establish a vantage point for viewing the Modern/Postmodern scene, and then to examine several aspects of contemporary culture, such as science, theology, education, and the humanities. In the final chapters, Smith offers suggestions for moving out of the woods and into a twenty-first century that affirms the ultimate truths of love, the human soul, and the Divine. With a new preface and a new final chapter, this edition proves to be a guiding light in a time of doubt.

ISLAM: A CONCISE INTRODUCTION



Drawn from his masterful presentation of Islam in the bestselling *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith offers a highly readable and incisive guide to the heart of a tradition with more than 1 billion adherents worldwide. Dispelling narrow and distorted notions about the nature of Islam, Smith shows the rich history, culture, and values that sustain this vibrant tradition. As Huston points out, Islam itself means primarily "peace," and its full connotation is "the peace that comes when one's life is surrendered to God." Featuring a new introduction for these troubled times, the book covers not only the history and teachings, but also such timely issues as the true meaning of jihad, the role of women in Islamic societies, and the remarkable growth of Islam in America.

This book will stand apart as the least expensive and most concise, timely, and reliable introduction available today.



ONE NATION UNDER GOD: THE TRIUMPH OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH

The evolution and changes of the Native American Church are traced in a fine documentary which charts its struggle to preserve its religious freedom in the face of government challenges to its existence. Personal accounts by church members pepper this history and documentation of the Church's traditions and controversial rituals.

'Tales of Wonder,' by Huston Smith

Ari L. Goldman, Special to The Chronicle

Sunday, May 17, 2009

Tales of wonder

Adventures chasing the divine

By huston smith with jeffery paine

(Harperone; 209 pages; \$25.99)

The very first comparative religion book I owned was a paperback edition of Huston Smith's "The Religions of Man," which was first published in 1958 and later issued as "The World's Religions." All told, the book sold some 3 million copies.

When Smith starting writing about religion in the 1950s, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists were seen as exotic people of far-away countries. Today, we recognize them as our neighbors, co-workers and friends, even if we sometimes eye them warily. Smith opened up world religions for many of us through his 13 books on religion, his early public television show in the 1950s and the five-part PBS series that Bill Moyers did on him in 1996.

Now, in this delightful autobiography, issued to coincide with his 90th birthday this month, Huston Smith, the son of Methodist missionaries in China, tells us how he became Huston Smith, the dean of world religion experts. Along the way we meet the people who shaped him and shared his journey. The list reads like a Who's Who of 20th century spiritual America: the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Merton and Pete Seeger (who, like Smith, was born in 1919).

Smith also uses the opportunity of this memoir to settle a few scores. He thinks that Joseph Campbell (who also had a Bill Moyers series), "downgraded religion to the status of a myth." The fundamentalist religion of Campbell's youth so "scarred his boyhood in Scotland" that he couldn't see religion any other way, Smith writes.

Smith also has little use for another religion scholar, Alan Watts, whom he describes as "the guru of Zen who advised everyone to meditate but did not bother to do it himself." And then, he gives the ultimate backhanded compliment to Watts: "He was, however, an excellent companion to go drinking with."

Smith describes his method of scholarship as just the opposite of the Watts approach. First, he writes, "I would read each new religion's scriptures (the Qur'an, the Torah, and so on). Second, I would seek out its living authorities ... and learn by absorbing their example. Third, I would do the ritual, the devotion, and the practices, to internalize the religion. After I had done all that, two things remained: I had to teach that religion, and I had to write about it."

In this memoir, Smith recounts his journey from China to an academic career that took him to

Washington University in St. Louis, MIT (where he was miserable), Syracuse and UC Berkeley. And he talks about a lot of lucky breaks along the way: how his course on world religions led to a public-TV show, which led to a funded trip around the world, which led to a world religion book that catapulted him to fame.

He also writes frankly about the strains that fame put on his family. "I am a workaholic," he writes. He was so absorbed by his work that his wife, Kendra, threatened to leave him. And only later in life did he learn how much his children resented his trip around the world in 1957 when he left them with another family for seven months. (His wife went with him.)

This is a personal rather than philosophical book. Smith tries to tackle some of the great issues he has grappled with - like: If religion is so good, why has it caused so many wars? - but the questions are better than the answers.

At times, Smith talks about his religious journey in a way that doesn't seem intellectually honest. He says that he "practiced Hinduism unconditionally for ten years, then Buddhism for ten years, and then Islam for another ten years - all the while remaining a Christian and regularly attending a Methodist church." Or, as he puts it in another part of the book, "I never cancelled my subscription to Christianity."

Intellectual playfulness is definitely the spirit with which this book was written. Smith wrote the book, with the help of co-author Jeffery Paine, from his new home, an assisted-living facility in Berkeley where he finds himself ailing but filled with gratitude.

"The day sings its song of small grace notes. In the bathroom or the elevator I whisper under my breath, 'God, you are so good to me' - thirty-five or forty times a day I say it. It seems I finally have a mantra."

Right to his final act, Huston Smith is proving to be the consummate professor, giving us a valuable master class on faith and life.

Ari L. Goldman, a professor of journalism at Columbia University, is the author of "The Search for God at Harvard." E-mail him at books@sfchronicle.com.

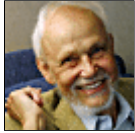
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Huston Smith: Rock star of religions turns 90

Heidi Benson, Special to The Chronicle
Thursday, May 21, 2009



A floor lamp with more arms than Shiva brightly illuminates a desk where the phone rings, a computer hums and messages fly from the fax machine. This is the command center of religious scholar Huston Smith, in the Berkeley assisted-living center he now calls home.

Outside, faded Tibetan prayer flags are strung along a balcony where potted bamboo sways in the sunshine. Inside, the Quran shares the bookshelf with the works of Plato, and Smith holds forth from a black leather recliner. He is abuzz, quick with jokes.

"I no longer stand on my head every morning," he says of his longtime yoga practice. "But if my osteoporosis gets any worse, I just might."

It is a busy time. This month, he celebrates his 90th birthday, as well as the 50th anniversary of his best-selling book, "The World's Religions," which inspired a popular PBS series. In addition, his autobiography, "Tales of Wonder: Adventures Chasing the Divine," has just been published by HarperOne. At just 200 pages, it is a dizzying tour of a singular life.

Smith was there when the 1945 U.N. charter was signed in San Francisco. He met Mother Teresa, interviewed Eleanor Roosevelt and invited the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to speak at Washington University in 1956. Seeking enlightenment, he took mescaline with Timothy Leary and peyote with an Indian shaman. He counts Saul Bellow, Aldous Huxley, Pete Seeger and the Dalai Lama among his legion of friends.


Uncanny timing

Asked about his uncanny timing, he declares: "Don't overlook Tiananmen Square!" Late on the night before the 1989 uprising, he arrived unsuspectingly in Beijing for a conference on Chinese philosophy. "In the morning, we got word from BBC Radio, all the way from London, that Beijing was in chaos," he recalled.

He and his colleagues went down to the street, where "everyone was on the side of the students." And where everyone was headed to Tiananmen Square. They climbed in a car with a sign taped to the window: "Foreign Visitors Support Student Strike."

"We couldn't get closer than three blocks. It was like a funnel. But when the students saw the sign, they

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waved us through," he recalled. "One of our party was hoisted onto the top of the car. In Chinese he said, 'Democracy is not only for America. Democracy is not only for China. Democracy is for the entire world.' There was a tumult of cheers."

Looking back as a witness to history, he rebuffs the notion of divine intervention, but allows: "It almost seemed like it was masterminded for me to be in the right place at the right time."

Smith was born in 1919 in China, where his parents were Christian missionaries.

"In my town, I had only one adult American male role model: my father," he explained. "I grew up taking it for granted that missionaries were what American boys grew up to be."

He came to the States for college, expecting to earn his degree and return to China. "But I hadn't calculated on the dynamism of the West," he said.

Propelled by intellectual curiosity, he earned a doctorate at the University of Chicago, where he met Kendra, the woman who would be his wife for 65 years. Soon after, he took his first teaching post in St. Louis, and his parents were expelled from China after the 1949 Communist takeover. Now, there was no going back.

He went on to teach at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Syracuse University and UC Berkeley, write 15 books, receive 12 honorary degrees and create television specials. He has been called the rock star of religious studies. As a kind of participatory scholar, he has applied to his life that which he's learned from the world's great faiths. And his inclusive approach has rhymed with the times.

"I happen to be a Christian. I was brought up and drenched in that," he said. "I am very orthodox in thinking that Jesus acted in his life the way God would have acted if God had assumed human form."

But, he explained, "I'm not a chauvinist. I'm a universalist. I think that God imploded, like a spiritual big bang, to launch the eight civilizations that make up recorded history and the religions in those civilizations."

Today, on a sunny morning in Berkeley, he reiterates his belief in the power of human intention. "The Buddha is in me, the Buddha is in you," he says, with a dazzling smile and a bit of a challenge. "Live up to it."

Is he optimistic about the future?

'On the hook'

"I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. An optimist says, in effect, 'Don't worry, it's going to turn out all right.' A pessimist says, 'It's going down the drain, and there's nothing you can do about it,' " he said.

"Both get us off the hook. Our place is on the hook. Whether things turn out for the better depends on what we do. We ought not spend our time masterminding the future, but recognize our marching orders: to do the best we can for history and the planet.

"One of my favorite prayers was written by a 9-year-old. His mother found it scribbled on a note beside his bed: 'Dear God, I'm doing the best I can.' "

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/21/DD1G17MMIH.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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Newsweek

Huston Smith's Wonderful Life

The author of 'The World's Religions' looks back on 90 years of prayer, yoga and dropping acid.

Lisa Miller

NEWSWEEK

From the magazine issue dated May 18, 2009

Huston Smith is doing publicity for his 14th book, though at nearly 90 he IS debilitated by osteoporosis and can't get up from his leather chair. When a visitor enters his room at the Berkshire, an assisted-living facility in Berkeley, Calif., he smiles broadly, indicates a small wicker seat and cheerfully warns of a high-pitched whine that sometimes emanates from his hearing aid. One is reminded that there is nothing glamorous about growing old, but Smith—who has arguably been the most important figure in the study of religion over the past five decades—makes it look at least bearable.

The new book, "Tales of Wonder," is a memoir. It begins at the beginning, with Smith's boyhood in Dzang Dok, China, where he was the middle son of Methodist missionaries. It ends in this two-story building in Berkeley, where Smith banters, in Chinese, with Mr. Lin, the maintenance man.

In the middle, Smith recounts professional adventures—meeting Martin Luther King Jr., befriending Aldous Huxley and the Dalai Lama, dropping acid with Timothy Leary—as well as personal catastrophes. His oldest daughter, Karen, died at 50 of cancer; his granddaughter Serena died under mysterious circumstances at 30. A determined sense of grace and optimism pervades the narrative. Smith still believes that God is good, and an encounter with Smith—through the written word or in person—bestows a kind of contentment by association: this is what it feels like to have lived a long and interesting life. The book is poignant and readable, though one wishes Smith had written it a decade ago, the better to infuse it with the passionate vitality for which he is so well known.

Smith was a professor. He taught at MIT and Syracuse and other universities, and he talked about religion on public television. But he is best known for a book he wrote in 1958—before the yoga craze and the meditation craze, before the Beatles went to India—called "The World's Religions." (Upon publication, it was called "The Religions of Man," but Smith changed the title in 1991.) Each chapter is 40 or 50 pages long and each encapsulates and explicates a great religious tradition. There are eight: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and what Smith calls the "Primal Religions," meaning those of native people. In today's world, where scholars exhaust careers parsing one or two Bible verses, a professor who dares summarize Christianity in 50 pages might be seen as foolhardy. But in his day, Smith was doing something revolutionary. Without oversimplification or condescension, Smith introduced Americans to the notion that the world is full of all kinds of believers and that an educated person might learn a thing or two from another's faith. "The World's Religions" has sold 2.5 million copies since publication. It has been reprinted more than 60 times.

Foundational to "The World's Religions"—and, indeed, to the way Smith approaches his subject in every instance—is this idea: at base, all the great religions are the same. This universalism grows out of Smith's personal history. He was a child in a place where (in his world, at least) Christianity, Buddhism and a little bit of Confucianism were enmeshed—yet he was raised by parents who fervently believed that Christ alone was the way to heaven. As a mature thinker, Smith embraced the first part of his boyhood experience and rejected the second. He spent his life learning about, practicing and then popularizing religions other than the one into which he was born. He has been doing yoga every morning for 50 years. (He used to demonstrate the lotus position on television

but now counts himself lucky if he can put his right foot atop his left thigh.) For a decade he did the salat, Islam's ritual prayer. He studied Zen Buddhism. When asked whether all great religions lead to salvation, Smith's answer is an unequivocal yes. Religion, he says, is like a walnut. "The shell is exoteric, it's outside, visible. The kernel is esoteric, invisible. Both are important ... Esoterically, religions are identical. Exoterically, they are different." Raised a Christian, Smith says he will never be anything but a Christian. "You subtract Christianity from Huston Smith, and there is no Huston Smith left."

In the academy today, Smith's big idea is seen as quaint. His all-embracing approach papers over real differences in religious ritual, practice and culture, critics say, that are necessary to understanding the world and the conflicts within it: "Smith and others have led us down a rabbit hole of nonreality that we are now trying to climb back out of," says Stephen Prothero, a religion professor at Boston University who is at work on his own book about world religions. "Is Islam the same as Christianity? To con ourselves into thinking they're the same is to believe in something that is false." Smith's contributions to the field of religious studies were crucial at a time when Americans were more parochial, says Prothero. ("The World's Religions," he adds, is "the most important book in religious studies ever.") But now, he says, it's time to move on.

Smith, however, continues to live his beliefs. On a recent Monday morning he woke up, dressed, got settled in his chair and read chapter 21 of the Book of Acts, in which the Apostle Paul asks, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?" Next he read a friend's commentary on a verse from the Bhagavad-Gita. Then he started to pray, first for people in his life who are suffering—on this day for a friend's daughter who has cancer—and then, at last, for himself. "I begin by asking myself, 'What is my mood? How are my feelings?' I try to understand myself because we have it on good authority from the Holy Qur'an that 'He who knoweth himself knoweth the Lord.' The answer that came up was, 'I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm well. And I'm grateful.'" Finally, he tries to meditate, but even at 90 he finds it difficult to quiet all the thoughts in his mind.

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