

WATER FROM A DEEPER WELL

HUSTON SMITH ON WHY SPIRITUALITY
WITHOUT RELIGION ISN'T ENOUGH

an interview by APRIL THOMPSON

Photo: Jeffrey Hersch

In 1955, decades before mainstream America had heard of Zen Buddhism or the Koran, Huston Smith introduced us to the world's religions on public television. An ordained United Methodist minister and religion professor, Smith produced the seventeen-part television series *The Religions of Man*. The tremendous response to the program spurred him to write his now-classic book *The World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco), which has sold more than two million copies.

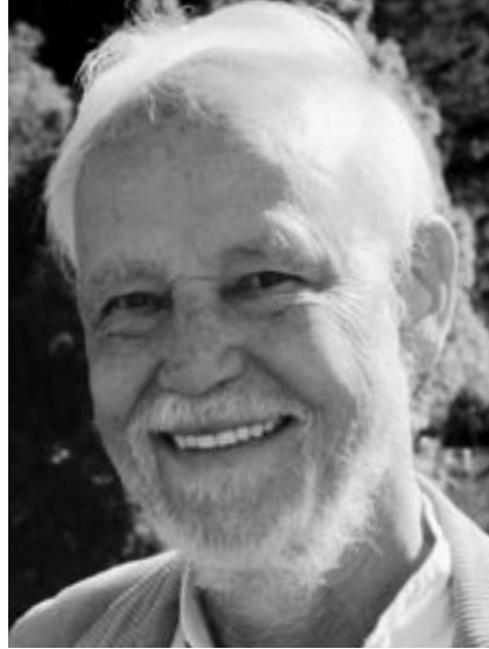
At eighty-three, Smith is still teaching America about the world's religions. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, he's been working fervently to dispel stereotypes regarding Islam and encourage interfaith dialogue. He often speaks out against the arrogance of science, the frivolity of New Age movements, and the secularization of American churches. "We are not," he says, "going to make much progress on educating the human spirit until we find out who we are. And right now we don't have a clue." An important part of the answer lies in the world's "wisdom traditions," which help us deal with what is precious to the human spirit: values, meaning, and purpose.

The holder of twelve honorary degrees, Smith has taught religion and philosophy at MIT, Washington University, Syracuse University, and the University of California at Berkeley. He has authored more than eighty articles and eleven books, including *Forgotten Truth: The Common View of the World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco), *One Nation under God: The Triumph of the Native American Church* (Clear Light), *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (Tarcher), and, most recently, *Why Religion Matters* (HarperSanFrancisco). His films on Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Sufism have all won international awards. In 1996, Bill Moyers dedicated the PBS series *Wisdom of Faith* to Smith's life and work.

Smith doesn't like to take credit for his accomplishments, however. "I see myself, and my whole life's work," he says, "as simply a transmitter of what the great wisdom traditions have revealed. And each of these different traditions has some version of *tat tvam asi* — the Hindu notion that the deepest element within us is divine."

Smith's understanding of world religions hasn't come just from books. Ingesting peyote with the Winnebago Indians and mescaline with Timothy Leary have put mystical flesh on the intellectual bones of his faith. So have his spiritual wanderings, from growing up in a missionary family in rural China, to training in a Zen monastery in Japan, to studying with a Sufi mystic in Iran, to taking a sabbatical in a Tibetan monastery. Though a hip replacement has obligated Smith to swap yoga for physical therapy, he still prays, meditates, and studies Scripture daily.

I met with Smith on two occasions at his family's Berkeley, California, home. The walls and shelves were filled with religious art and family photos. Smith asked me to face a sunny window overlooking their garden, so that he could read my lips to supplement his fading hearing. It was a rare pleasure to witness the workings of his brilliantly clear mind and near-flawless memory, but his intellect did not eclipse his heart. In person, Smith exhibits all the kindness, generosity, and compassion taught by the traditions to which he has devoted his life.



HUSTON SMITH

Thompson: You were born into a missionary family in China. How did that experience affect your course in life?

Smith: My family was the only Western family in a small town in rural China, so I grew up having only one adult role model: my father. I assumed that I would be a missionary like him. I came to college in the U.S. thinking I would get my credentials and go right back, but I had not counted on the dynamism of the West. I attended a tiny little college — Central Methodist, enrollment six hundred — in the small town of Fayette, Missouri. Nevertheless, compared to rural China, it was the big time and the bright lights. Within two weeks, I had given up all thought of returning to China. This caused no vocational crisis, however, for I simply moved next door: instead of being a missionary, I would be a minister.

Whereas the plan to become a missionary lasted two weeks, the plan to become a minister lasted two years. Then, in my junior year in college, something extraordinary happened. And it happened in a single night that I remember vividly, for it was like a powerful conversion experience.

There was, in my nondescript college, one superb teacher, and he started a philosophy-of-religion club. One evening each month we would gather in his home and take turns reading papers we had written on some philosophical topic and discussing them. At ten o'clock cherry pie would appear, and after we'd all had some, we would return to our dormitory.

The evening I remember differed from all the others. Early on I felt a growing mental agitation as I was drawn into the issues we were discussing. This discussion continued as we returned to our dorm, and when we arrived, three or four of us stood in the hall still going at it with hammer and tongs. When, around midnight, we went to our rooms, my mind was

still churning, and it kept on churning in bed until, around two in the morning, it detonated — that's the best way I can think of to describe what happened. It was like the sequence in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* that depicts the future rushing toward the viewer in rivers of light, only the rivers I was experiencing consisted of Platonic ideas or forms. There I was, a young man with my whole life ahead of me in which to explore those ideas! The prospect was so exciting that I wonder if I slept at all that night. In any case, when I got up the next morning I knew I would not be a clergyman. I would be a teacher.

Thompson: You've stayed close to your Christian roots while rigorously undertaking the disciplines of other faiths, particularly Vedanta, Buddhism, and Sufism. How did you become involved in such varying traditions?

Smith: I didn't go out seeking to understand these religions. It would be more accurate to say that they just came over me, like tidal waves. My first teaching appointment was at Washington University in St. Louis, after the Second World War. The call had just gone out to "globalize" the university, the thought being that if we understood other parts of the world better, we might be able to avoid such conflicts in the future. At my university, the dean sent out word that every department — except science — had to teach one course in non-Western material. I was the low man on the totem pole, so I was assigned the job of teaching world philosophies and religions.

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Now, I had spent all my years in higher education, right up to the Ph.D. level, trying to catch up and become a real, red-blooded Westerner, so I knew nothing about Eastern religions. There was a Vedanta society in town, Vedanta being the philosophical arm of Hinduism. I called around and found out they had a discussion group — sort of like a Bible study group, only they studied the Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads. That first evening, the swami, a consummate Sanskrit scholar and a wonderful man, discussed three verses from the Upanishads. I bought a copy, took it home, and read the verses before I went to bed. It got to me, how so much truth could come through in two pages. That was another sleepless night.

I spent ten years apprenticing myself to the swami, learning the philosophy of Vedanta and how to meditate. And I was perfectly content with Christianity and Vedanta until D.T. Suzuki came to America with Zen Buddhism. Then I was happy with those three, until Sufism came along.

Thompson: Was it difficult to reconcile these different belief systems?

Smith: I didn't have the slightest problem. The similarities were so strong it was almost as if I were hearing the same truths spoken in different languages. But they're not identical, of course, and their differences are as fascinating as the similarities. Each one fleshes out a certain part of the truth about the human spirit. Together they form a sort of mosaic or jigsaw puzzle.

Thompson: There's a Buddhist parable that says that one won't find water by digging many shallow holes. What do you make of the claim that one must dedicate one's life to a single spiritual path to reach the deepest truth?

Smith: I agree that the cafeteria-style approach to religion — I'll take a little shamanism from the Native Americans, and some compassion from Buddhism, and so on — doesn't work. Chögyam Trungpa, a great Tibetan Buddhist teacher, put it very accurately: When you go down the cafeteria line, you pick out what you like, but not necessarily what you need. If you knew what you needed at the start, Trungpa says, you'd be at the end, rather than at the beginning of your search. At the beginning, you know only what your taste buds tell you.

I don't want to bad-mouth this approach, but I don't think it has the depth of committing yourself to a single tradition. That's why, from the start, Christianity has been my central meal. But I'm a strong believer in vitamin supplements. My experiences with these other traditions have been tremendously enriching. I don't recommend my approach to everybody, though. I've been fortunate to earn my living by immersing myself in other traditions, so I've been able to devote a lot of time to them. Most people can't do this.

Thompson: How do you suggest people decide what tradition is right for them?

Smith: Neophytes would do well to study the texts of the great traditions carefully and see how they relate to their lives. Also, many will benefit from finding a guru, someone who has been at this longer than they have. Now, we know from the last twenty years that there are fraudulent gurus, or gurus who start out well but have their heads turned by being idolized by their followers. This does not undermine the importance of the guru tradition, however. We all need role models, especially in our early years, before our character is formed.

A guru points out the things we overlook. The role of an authentic guru is tragic, because it is a guru's job to put him- or herself out of business by bringing disciples to the point where the guru is no longer needed. The Zen Buddhist adage "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha" puts it very vividly: once one has reached an accomplished stage of spirituality, the teacher's task is done.

When I finished my training in a Zen monastery in Japan, my *roshi* invited me to his little pavilion in the temple complex.



We had worked intensively together for three months, and my devotion to him knew no bounds. In the course of that farewell session, he gave me a tour of his house. He walked me through the tiny kitchen and introduced me to the woman who took care of his food and housekeeping. Then we went into another room, where there was a television. He said, "This is where I watch television on my free evenings. Do you watch sumo wrestling?" I said I didn't. "Too bad," he said. "It's wonderful." And then he took me outside, where there were crates of empty beer bottles, and he said, "Here is what I drink while I'm watching sumo wrestling."

This tour seemed a bit bizarre until I saw the wisdom of it. He wanted to bring himself down from the pedestal; he could not let me leave Japan thinking he was a saint. And that was exemplary behavior for a guru.

Thompson: I think many people have a lot of trouble with gurus in this society because we are so independent. We don't want to enter into that kind of subordinate relationship.

Smith: Our society extolls a sort of independent spirituality while criticizing organized religions, but I find this type of spirituality lacking. My favorite example of the deficiency of spirituality alone is Barbara Walters' two-hour interview with Monica Lewinsky. At one point Walters says to Lewinsky, "President Clinton has confessed that he has sinned in his relation to you. Do you think you have sinned?" And Lewinsky sort of squirms in her chair and says, "Well, you know, I'm not

very religious. I'm more spiritual." There you have it — the narcissistic side of spirituality.

In my years of teaching at UC Berkeley, I found that *spirituality* is a good word on campus, while *religion* is not. I never met a student who did not feel that she or he had a spiritual side, but if asked about religion, their standard response is that it's dogmatic and moralistic. For them, religion says, "We've got the truth, and everybody else is going to hell." It says, "Don't do this, don't do that, and especially don't do the other thing." At first, I suspected that their responses originated from some unfortunate brushes with organized religion, but their replies were so standardized that in the end I came to think that many of them were just repeating stereotypes. Probably most of them had never regularly attended a church or a synagogue in their lives.

Religion is organized spirituality, and as such, it has the same problems as every other organization or institution. I do not know of a totally pure organization or corporation. Take universities: the learning that goes on in them is wonderful, but universities carve up knowledge into departments and units, and there's factionalism, political correctness, and the whole scramble for academic reputation. There are similar downsides to organized religion, but they tend to be seen in a harsher light. We don't fault all doctors for the mistakes of the American Medical Association.

(end of excerpt)