MY IMPRESSIONS FROM READING HUSTON SMITH'S "*WHY RELIGION MATTERS*"

INTRODUCTION TO REVIEW

I believed, when I first perused Huston Smith's "Why Religion Matters, The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief," (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) that my entire project of defining for myself just what it means to find myself alive, a sentient being, was moot. It had already been done by Smith. So I devoted some time to closely read every word of this book. It had a title that promised much, and an author whom I knew from experience was capable of delivering much. I expected profound insights. I expected to be satisfied. I expected to be able to agree with the book and thus be done with my quest to define what it means to be human and alive.

So, I obtained the book and read it a chapter at a time and took notes as I read. It took several chapters for me to come to the point where I was no longer accepting of every assertion being made, and I raised my guard, a little. I was dismayed when I finally got to Part II of the book. I had at one time thought of skipping all of Part I, which thoughtfully sets the stage for the discussion I was most interested in, and which was promised for Part II. Part I documents the social and cultural state of disbelief and non-belief in postmodern western society. It delves into the historical, religious, scientific, legal, educational and even commercial influences at war with religion. I am glad I decided to read Part I, and will tell why, shortly.

So what dismayed me about Part II? It starts with a discussion of modern physics, which is not at all badly done but automatically

raises my guard. Then it does the unthinkable, and cites several archdruids of New Age pseudo-physics, in my opinion. Nonlocality is cited as if it were established truth, in support of the existence of realms heretofore unknown which operate outside the accepted and currently known laws of physics. At the end of the discussion there is an admission that there is no general agreement on this topic within the physics community, and the persons cited are mavericks and proud of it.

After that, I could relax again. Physics as a way to make religion again palatable to scientists was finished as a topic. So with bated breath I moved on to the last few chapters where all my questions would be answered. Turns out none were answered quite as I expected them to be, and major insights turned out to be ones I could adopt as my own, because they were already my own if one makes some modifications. Nevertheless, it is a marvelous book.

But let's go back now and see where Smith's first chapters caused me to sometimes roar in agreement and sometimes not, and how that impacted my ability to accept the key conclusions at the end of the book.

MAIN THEME OF PART I OF BOOK

Smith's theme is that scientism, science as a religion or a belief system, has pushed modernity into a dark and murky place with no light at the end of it: a tunnel. He likens it at one point to the escape tunnel built by a man dissatisfied with his home life – a place where he can go to get away from his burdens and enter a new realm. He also likens it to the cave image used by Plato (page 5) to suggest that we are sitting in a dark place reading reality from the outside light filters in and whose faded shadows are reflected on the wall in front of us.

I was in vehement agreement with Smith on his pages 3 and 4 where he states what to him is obvious, which can be distilled into these three observations: (1) "mundane existence" does not "satisfy" a certain universal "longing" within humans. (2) Fulfillment requires God, a concept embodying and thus causing a reaching for "the best that we can conceive. (3) "With God and the world categorically distinguished but nowhere disjoined, other things fall into place" . . . .

I did not paraphrase Smith's words in item three because it is a very efficient statement characterizing, I believe, the role and power of religion at its best. It simplifies life, it allows us to get on with living rather than worrying about what life really is before fully engaging ourselves in it. But of course, since religions contradict one another, this aspect of religion only works for true believers, I think while reading this. I think this because at one time I enjoyed the certainty of true belief, and now I am reading this book with hope of learning something about what life is!

What Smith says next, on page 4, bothered me at first because I was still thinking about religious contradictions as the cause of the fall of religion's power among humans, especially in the West. But, as I continued to read I ended up agreeing: religion worked like this among its believing adherents (ones who accepted their religion and believed in its teachings, not the atheists and skeptics already among them) until science came along and undid religion as a credible "worldview." When asked if Smith was angry at science, he responded:

> **I am angry at *us*—modern Westerners who, forsaking clear thinking, have allowed ourselves to become so obsessed with life's material underpinnings that we have written science a blank check. . . . I am talking about a blank check for**

> **science's claims concerning what constitutes knowledge and justified belief.**

He had my attention: the claim of some that the only real knowing comes from objective scientific observation does seem to me to go too far. It excludes the possibility of anything being "real" outside the physical realm accessible to the senses, as magnified by the tools of science. It says my intuition is unreliable, my intellect, to the extent it is properly informed, is the only reliable tool for knowing. We are already at the very heart of my problem with XX's book, and we are only on page 4!

In reading this book by Smith it is important to go slow on page 12 and make sure we understand the italicized terms in these sentences:

> ***Cosmology* is the study of the physical universe—or the world of nature as science conceives it—and is the domain of science. *Metaphysics*, on the other hand, deals with all there is. (The term *worldview* and *Big Picture* are used interchangeably with *metaphysics* in this book.) In the worldview that holds that nature is all there is, metaphysics coincides with cosmology. That metaphysics is called *naturalism*.**

Smith next walks through an interesting history of science, especially physics, whose account of the Big Bang is said to demolish the traditional creation-account. It is a good discussion, but I disagree with his characterization of physics having had a golden age where real discoveries were made and now just spending billions on ferreting out the mundane details. Hey, both the electron and the positron are subatomic particles, we live on electricity, and a PET scan uses an anti-matter particle called a positron. Other applications are bound to come along. This

negativism about modern physics research smacks of the same foolishness found in "The Dancing Wu-Li-Masters" by Gary Zukav, and thus I wasn't surprised when in Part II of the book Smith cites interviews with a primary source relied on by Zukav. It is precisely in ferreting out these so-called "details" that these highly prized theories are becoming understood and in some cases adjusted or augmented to accommodate further knowledge.

To me, it is every bit as exciting as those heady days of great intuitive discoveries being reduced to mathematical formulas, because the testing has generally corroborated the correctness of those formulas. In some ways it is more exciting, because we have created tools that extend our senses into the realm of the subatomic particle, a great human feat deserving appreciation and wonder in and of itself. It is gratifying to me that Nobel Prizes in Physics have gone to some whose very practical, yet painstakingly intricate, work is being denigrated here in Smith's book!

What baffles me is that this denigration of modern experimental physics has nothing whatever to do with Smith's theme. He steps aside from his main theme, as it were, to slap some innocent bystanders: scientists who are no threat to his main theme except that some of their work, I believe, calls into question some of the more outlandish claims cited by Smith later in the book. These are claims that, in my opinion, also do not help his main theme, because they seduce one into looking for things spiritual in the unimaginably small-sized, but still material, world.

But the progress in particle physics, especially, continues to be fascinating for me. It illustrates the complexity of nature in terms never before experienced or expected. It is also leading to a grand unified model/theory of matter that will in turn lead to a new revolution in physics and material science. Smith speaks with a mild tone of disparagement of the "theories that change back and

forth" and I suspect he is referring to the fate of many false turns along the way to this future grand unified model/theory. To me this shows science is working exactly as it should, hypotheses are formulated based on what is known, experiments are conducted to test these hypotheses, and experimentally driven changes in the perception of reality leads to their adjustment. This is the scientific method at its best, ever challenging its pronouncements on the nature of nature.

So, I was irritated with Smith's description of the science, on his pages 14 and 15. At the same time I was in general agreement with his larger observation about science's supplanting the traditional worldview in this postmodern age, unjustly and prematurely, by asserting that nature (as observable through science's tools) is all there is.

Smith praises the postmodern mind set for seeking to promote human rights, an area where traditional (meaning religious) worldviews have failed badly. This discussion on pages 16 through 19 surprised me though I agreed with it. What surprised me is that Smith did not go into a discussion of why postmodernism, which says humans are but meat-based machines without intrinsic value, actually seeks to create ethical societies. By contrast the traditional worldview with its emphasis on God being the creator of the human being and being concerned with human behavior is apparently not nearly as concerned with promoting ethical societies beyond its own sub-society of adherents. This is but a caricature of what Smith described, but it is the puzzle that stayed with me as I moved on in my reading. When I got to page 248 in Part II I was baffled to read a statement that seemed contradicted by pages 16 through 19. I'll get to that later.

The material in this chapter and the next (pages 11 through 41) is rich with observation and insight, and I recommend reading the

whole book. My notes start again for pages 28 and 29 where Smith returns to his opening lines about the dis-ease of modern humanity:

> **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. I mentioned that longing in the Introduction and need now to describe it more fully.**
>
> **There is within us—in even the blithest, most lighthearted among us—a fundamental dis-ease. 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. All great literature, poetry, art, philosophy, psychology, and religion tries to name and analyze this longing. We are seldom in direct touch with it, and indeed the modern world seems set on preventing us from *getting* in touch with it by covering it with an unending phantasmagoria of entertainments, obsessions, addictions, and distractions of every sort. But the longing is there, built into us like a jack-in-the-box that presses for release. . . . 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.**
>
> **Release from those walls calls for space outside them, and the traditional world provides that space in abundance.**

Smith describes this grand vista that the human spirit can explore as "quality-laden throughout," in places "terrifying," but still greatly preferable to the materialistic vista that is the quantitative universe (all parts value-less) of physics.

Fair enough, my notes say, but if in fact the religious worldviews are mutually contradictory, imaginary concoctions, are we not as

well served by entertainments and distractions that serve to momentarily move us out of the stern reality of finding ourselves alive in a value-less material universe? If we are an incidental, if not quite accidental, ephemeral phenomenon, what is the point? Part II is where Smith addresses this issue in summary form.

Do I appear to be reinforcing Smith's point that losing the religious world-view makes the obsessions of the post-modern world inevitable? Maybe so, but my larger point in my notes was that religions have taken this longing, and in response have promised entry into the tunnel that allows escape (the tunnel of the near-death experience comes to mind). Yes. They have done that and so have addressed the "longing." But they have then stood as a Medieval highwaymen alongside the portal which they claim to exclusively control in God's name, and have exacted a price for the mere promise of potential entry. Potential, because they also teach that entry is dependent on the purity of the traveler's faith and the degree of his or her obedience, in many cases. Whether the price of entry is living a controlled life, and/or giving money, is neither here nor there. My point is that religions have historically claimed to have the key to salvation and have exacted a price from believers who trust this key to be operated in their behalf.

Religions have also, at times, fought hard to stop science from looking into anything about the physical universe already defined by religious declaration. The execution or banishment of now-celebrated scientists for heresy when they refused to cease and desist performing and publicizing their studies. Death and prison for failing to obey the demands of the church has been well documented. Smith makes only fleeting reference to this, and acknowledges that the memory of it lingers, but asserts that religion is no threat to science in present day Western societies (p. 99):

> **. . . religion is in no position to threaten today's science-dominated university. But it *has* threatened education in the past, and memories die slowly. Moreover, off campus (in society at large) the competition between the two sides for the public mind continues apace.**

To me this is a very uncomfortable statement. Religions have changed and are on the defensive because the new secular state has marginalized them as Smith establishes. Smith argues for a correction to be made to the playing field, the marginalization has gone too far. This argument is implied by the interesting discussion on pages 129 to 131, which praises the U.S. for not establishing a religion to be the defender of the status quo and not allowing a religion to grab power. But, Smith suggests the correction of past abuses has moved too far when it disqualifies the religious voice from participation in public discourse. Religious believers resist the excesses of the prevailing culture, and this is often a good thing.

Smith suggests that this religious role of resisting governments and social excesses is a direct result of the deep roots of belief lying outside national institutions and even outside time. The Taliban's brutally oppressive rule in Afghanistan, as well other religion-based regimes that may have been or may still be comparable to some degree, are not mentioned by Smith. To me they may be examples of loyalties lying outside earthly boundaries and time. They are of the same type of fanatical movement as the Catholic Church spawned in some times and at some places in the past. There are great differences, but the point to me is that given absolute power and strong belief, precisely because the basis for faith lies outside current institutions and even outside time itself, human true believers will enforce and defend their worldview through violent oppression. Regardless of how nice religions are now playing in the West, mainstream religions as well as others,

human nature, the nature of the believer, has not changed as Smith documents positively and nicely on his pages 37, 41 and 51 in Part I. And it is that human nature, deriving benefit from the traditional worldview that makes sense of life, that tends to abuse power and even kill to protect that comfort-shield, that believer's vision of reality, from challenges.

The U.S. Founding Fathers, as Smith recognized correctly, understood the power of religious belief and took it seriously. Therefore, as Smith argues on his pages 129 through 131, they mandated the separation of church and state. It is a separation still being defined in the courts, and has slid from legal separation to legally supported marginalization. Smith makes a case, in his Chapter 7, that suggests the courts have acted with undue zealousness to suppress some religious practices and have also unknowingly established a religion, by defining the atheistic worldview as the only acceptable worldview in public life. Some of these defining decisions came as late as the year 2000, so this is not a historical discussion, it is a discussion of current events.

In this same context, however, Smith summarily documents the bloodiest regimes the world may have ever known. On his pages 151 to 153 he describes the secular religion-like movements championing progress as a worldview for its devotees. This includes the Nazi movement and its Holocaust, the Stalinist regime and its Terror, Mao's cleansing of a nation through his Cultural Revolution. To that list I would add the killing fields of reeducation in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. I know that Smith's point is that what humans have created to supplant the religious worldview has been vastly more abusive, but to me it again points out the extent to which humans can go to protect their chosen worldview from challenge. The greater difference between the visions of destruction in the book of Revelation and the Stalinist terror, for example, is that the visionary of Revelation was

powerless, and imagined his enemies being slain by God's destroying agents. Stalin, Hitler, Mao and the zealots of the reeducation after the fall of Saigon had total power to enforce their vision against challengers, real or imagined. They sent their own agents of destruction to cleanse the world of unbelievers, just like God in the Revelation.

On his pages 113 to 115 Smith suggests that to look for religious roots in modern religious conflicts is to miss the point. He acknowledges that when a new religion starts up there is often conflict and it can be bloody and have religious belief at its heart. However, even though religion helps sides define themselves, in modern conflicts the reasons for bloodshed and terror tend to lie in politics and not in differing beliefs about worldviews. I found it of interest that Smith suggested that the real differences between Islam and Judaism are small enough that Mohamed was probably surprised by his rejection as a prophet by both Jews and Christians.

So, when it comes to views of the historical lessons presented by religions being empowered, Smith and I do not really disagree. But when it comes to the implications of these historical lessons for the present day, Smith and I are in separate worlds.

This fundamental disagreement does not at all interfere with my learning from Smith what he considers to be the positive contribution that the traditional worldview makes to human life. I agree that the things he describes are positives, and I agree they should not be marginalized. But religion per se is not the key to these positive characteristics, which places me in the same category as Monica Lewinsky whom Smith somewhat disparagingly cites as saying: "I'm not very religious. I'm more spiritual." But that quote resides in Part II, so it will have to come later.

POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEW

On pages 34 through 38 Smith describes and contrasts the traditional and scientific worldviews. I will attempt a small table that summarizes the interesting paragraphs presented into just a few words:

Contrasting Characteristic	Traditional (Religious) Worldview	Scientific Worldview
1. Spirit and Matter	*"Spirit is fundamental and matter derivative."* Matter is like occasional icebergs floating in a universe that is a vast sea of spiritual reality.	Spirit is not a recognized concept. Consciousness only exists as an attribute of the most advanced organisms. Thus it is a rare thing in the universe.
2. Derivation	Humans are *"the less who have derived from the more."* They are creatures or emanations of a creator, children of God.	Humans are *"the more that have derived from the less."* There is no thing in the universe more intelligent then humans.
3. Happy Ending	Individuals are redeemed into a glorified state after death (unless going to hell, but it is a	Consciousness ceases to exist, as the organism dies. The universe will end in a lifeless state via

	temporary state); earth/nature is also redeemed at the end of time in some traditions.	**either a cold eternal expansion or a hot contraction.**
4. Meaning	**Life, individually as well as for the world, has meaning. The universe was created intentionally, for a purpose.**	**There is no intrinsic meaning in anything. The universe has no point.**
5. Belonging	**Humans belong in this world, they are at home here. Humans are made of the same sentient matter that composes the world and all that lives on it.**	**No sense of belonging can be derived from the scientific explanation of the world and life on it.**

I found two items in this comparison of special interest. First Smith's need to explain away the modern idea of an eternal hell as an idea originally more akin to a cleansing experience that is temporary. He returns to this in Part II. However, the fact that in mainstream Christianity hell is forever and includes all the countless billions who never heard of, let alone accepted, Christianity, puts a big question mark at the happy ending idea. For the true believer, however, the happy ending is as advertised.

In the belonging category Smith cites two scientists who have a negative attitude toward life. They are not representative, and, more important than that, they do not come nearly as close to loathing their own bodies and all of human existence as a lot of leaders of Christianity. Celibacy is a direct slap at nature, contrasting holiness with full participation in what nature has to offer. The marginalization of women in many traditions, even if there is no celibacy involved, partakes of the same negative-towards-life-as-a-biological-being mind set. Of course there is no sense of belonging to be derived from the scientific worldview. But neither is there a sense of NOT belonging here, of having a home of greater glory elsewhere that one cannot wait to return to or reach, that is so prevalent in historical Christianity at least.

Other than that, it is a fair set of contrasts. Well, another point, perhaps a nit, is that finding oneself sentient in a meaningless universe does not necessarily mean that one's life will be seen as having no point. It is the nature of sentience, whatever it is, to cause one to devise and assign meanings to things and to life. Hence the good motivations alluded to by Smith regarding human rights among the postmodern unbelievers. In some sense it can be said that overthrowing the claims to authority of organizations that typically have defended the indefensible status quo regarding human abuses of humans frees these unbelievers to attack problems that religions have never effectively addressed. Religions have been too casual about human suffering at the hands of despotic governments or social systems being something out of their control. Reality is that it is usually out of their control because they need permission of such governments and systems to exist in these countries. But suffering has not been seen for what it to some degree because all wrongs will be made right in the next life anyway. For some time persecution and martyrdom was celebrated, and when it waned it was even sought out by some zealots. Today there are traditions still teaching, and getting

volunteers for, holy martyrdom: giving ones life in making a faith-based political statement, and taking as many unbelievers with you as you can to amplify the message.

But Smith is talking about Modern, Western religions, ones who play nice. I can't help looking over my shoulders and seeing the commonalities in the rhetoric between these not-nice mostly Middle- Eastern groups and some of the more fundamentalist among us here in the West, however. I remember the history of the Crusades as a time when that frightening mind set was mainstream in the very heart of the religious tradition that, with her mainstream but rebellious offspring, now plays nice.

Smith concludes his contrasts on pages 40 and 41 with quotes from thoughtful men suggesting that life without transcendence, without spirit, without metaphysics, is intolerable. Hence the need for the traditional worldview, hence its resurgence no matter how hard it is being stifled and suppressed, I would add, because the next string of chapters address this very point by cataloguing all that is being done to marginalize religion. In Part II, however, a point is made to convincingly show that despite all these efforts, religion is not going away.

I suppose I should make a confession here. It is important to me that I bring in my misgivings about, even mistrust of, religious power, based on history. Why? Because the table above is a good description of how I believe. Intellectually I am solidly in accord with the scientific worldview. Based on all I have a solid basis for knowing, including in this case the contradictions and violence of religions, I believe in that problematic and non-comforting worldview on the right side of the table. BUT, and it is a big but:

When I turn off my evidence-based thought processes and go simply by what I feel to be reality at my very core, I am solidly on

the left side of that table, with Smith's denial of hell as one of my intuitive givens. In fact I go farther by also explicitly believing that the whole concept of salvation and its purchase through the blood of a perfect being is preposterous at the intuitive level, though having once been a true believer I recognize this it is also possible to include such belief on the intuitive side of the equation. Smith sidesteps this issue. But it is the issue that lies at the very heart of Christianity and makes it exclusive. Smith, like a good Gnostic, likens salvation to enlightenment on page 149. That is a deft sidestep but not one likely to endear Smith to believing Christians.

Should I somehow become more like Smith, and as XXX suggests I should do, integrate my two ways of knowing? If I forced myself to do so I would be in the right column and part of me militates against that precisely because, as Smith points out in Part II, knowing via science is not competent in defining the structure of these areas of potential reality. So, even my intellectual side cautions me not to become a devotee of scientism. I am describing a personal problem I thought might be solved by reading Smith's book. It was a naïve thought.

I had dozens of notes on the chapters cataloging what is being done to snuff out, or at least marginalize, religion, but in reality there are only two major points I want to call attention to out of all that material. The first point is to define scientism, since I have already used the term, and doing that involves Chapter 4 of Smith's book. The second point is to try to cull from all of Part I of Smith's book just what it is he believes to be authoritative in religion in terms of defining truth. After all, no one is as aware of the differences between the truth claims made by religions as Smith, who has made comparative religious studies his life's work.

SCIENTISM AS A SUBSTITUTE RELIGION

I just asserted that scientism is a substitute religion. To understand Smith's book it is necessary to understand that his beef is with scientism, not with science. On pages 59 and 60 he defines scientism, and all of Chapter 4, is devoted to illustrating scientism via examples. His definition is:

> **Scientism adds to science two corollaries: first, that the scientific method is, if not the *only* reliable method of getting at truth, then at least the *most* reliable method; and second, that the things science deals with—material entities—are the most fundamental things that exist. . . .**
>
> **. . . For the knowledge class in our industrialized Western civilization, it has come to seem self-evident that the scientific account of the world gives us its full story and that the supposed transcendent realities of which religions speak are at best doubtful. . . .**

I would have to agree when Smith asserts about the two corollaries that: "Unsupported by facts, they are at best philosophical assumptions and at worst merely opinions."

Smith suggests that scientism rides rough-shod over . . . "our hopes, dreams, intuitions, glimpses of transcendence, intimations of immortality, and mystical experiences" . . . . I agree, but since when are these very personal revelatory experiences trustworthy guides to truth? What is the source of authoritative truth in the traditional worldview?

Since I am reading a book by Steven Pinker as part of my reading list for my current project, I was surprised to see his name in this book twice, on pages 183 and 203. There he is each time mentioned

in company with others, and in a very critical context. In essence Smith is accusing him and his ilk of a particularly egregious degree of scientism in their claiming a scientific basis for their idea that conscience is a property of, thus dependent on, matter in a certain complex configuration. They admit that the mechanism for this postulate lies forever beyond the ability of science, or finite minds, to ferret out. However, they make light of, and argue vehemently against, the infusion of spirit into humans from a Divine Source, ridiculing it at one point as the idea of having a 'homunculus' in the head.

Clearly there is a problem here in terms of evidence. But isn't the same true for assertions of fact in the traditional world view?

AUTHORITATIVE TRUTH IN THE TRADITIONAL WORLDVIEW

Where do reliable revelations come from? On page 29 Smith suggests it is mystics:

> **Mystics are people who have a talent for sensing places where life's carapace is cracked, and through its chinks they catch glimpses of the world beyond. . . .**

Smith lists the revelations of some few well-known Hindu, Buddhist and Christian visionaries and then observes that:

> **Stories grow up around theophanies such as these, and in the course of generations they condense into myths that impregnate cultures with meanings and motivations.**

Knowing that these statements cause the reader to wonder just which of these visionaries represent truth, since their worldviews were not identical, Smith says he will defer a discussion of truth

into Part II. However, he does address truth again in Part I, on page 100, where he rejects the popular concept that there are two types of truth: objective, based on science; and subjective, based on religious feelings and experiences, therefore not grounded in knowledge. Thus, Smith suggests that religious knowledge may be as factual as science-derived knowledge.

Though I have deferred several discussions to my discussion of Part II, this is one I should tackle in this particular context, however. Chapter 13 is titled "This Ambiguous World" and suggests that certainty is hard to come by in this world. On pages 99 through 101 is a telling discourse on truth. Smith asserts that Truth has a capital 'T' among religious conservatives, a small 't' for religious liberals. Capital T Truth can lead to, but need not necessarily lead to, fanaticism. Small t truth can lead to "relativism" that can "bottom out into nihilism," says Smith. He describes tolerance as desirable, relativism as very undesirable. Smith cites a sentence that says: "Liberals do not recognize the spiritual wholeness that can come from the sense of certainty." Smith suggests this non-recognition of the power of certainty to induce spiritual wholeness underlies the steady loss of membership in liberal churches and the continuing growth of conservative churches.

He refrains from calling conservatives fundamentalist. Only once does he take a critical swipe at fundamentalist. It is also in the context of truth and mystic revelation. On page 30 Smith writes:

> **Myths are like the lines traditional peoples collectively and largely unconsciously draw to connect the "dots" of the direct disclosures that their visionaries report.**
>
> **If number is the language of science, myth is the language of religion. It does not map literally onto the commonsense world—biblical literalists' mistake is to think**

> **that it does—but that is not a problem, for as Steven Weinberg tells us, "We know how hopeless it is to try to fit quantum mechanics [too] into our everyday world."**

The problem with this comparison is that quantum mechanics has a well-defined sphere of influence and action and it is not discernable on the scale of matter in which we live. On the other hand, the spirit realm is one we faithfully suppose to be operating meaningfully at the scale in which we live. Smith cannot make bold statements about what truth is or is not in the religious context. To me, he is a great example of a thoughtful relativist, and I feel that to be a compliment in this particular case even though he disparages relativists.

SO WHAT WAS PART I ALL ABOUT?

Smith defined the traditional worldview and its primary challenge from the scientific/scientismic worldview. He points convincingly to abuses of religion and belief, and marginalization and ridiculing of belief and believers, in Western societies' most cherished and despised institutions: the press, the courts, and the universities. Unwittingly, to a large extent, each of these has fallen under the spell of scientism, science as religion, as the only legitimate and objective definer of reality. Even the commercial world, dependent on technology that results from science, introduces this bias in the sponsoring of the media and its fiscal support of the press introduces an additional bias to make news sensational.

To me the more useful content of Part I was its description of scientism as a new secular religion that tends to defend itself from challenges using whatever means available, as every other worldview tends to do. Though I now agree with this analysis, I see no obvious and ominous parallels with other secular worldviews such as communism and Nazism because the internal command

and control structure of the science that feeds scientism is diffuse. Science history has shown that the scientific establishment cannot stop new developments from overthrowing what may have been staples of the faith at some point in the past. In Part II, Smith illustrates this, perhaps unwittingly, when he documents the rough reception some of Jacob Bohm's ideas received from those who at one time were his admirers. Smith himself fell into what I feel to be a classic scientism trap by pointing to a golden age of physics when real discoveries were made and disparaging what is now being done experimentally. The outcomes of these experiments have called into question some of the theories most cherished outside of physics, by New Age and religious worldview devotees, like Smith himself.

Smith describes the relationship between Part I and Part II of his book this way (p. 91):

> **I will go so far as to admit that this entire first half of my book can be read as an extended investigation into the way motives we were not conscious of have caused us to pin our hopes excessively on science. But I do not make such muckraking my supreme concern. My supreme concern is the nature of things, to which the second half of this book is devoted.**

OK. So let's move to Part II, and discover the nature of things.

THAT WAS PART I, NOW – PART II

The first few chapters of Part II made me glad I had read Part I because they try to distill key points from the earlier chapters and build on them.

Part II starts with a title, "The Light at the Tunnel's End," and the first chapter in Section II is all about "Light" and makes claims for light to illustrate it is a soundly chosen metaphor for intelligence, revelation, knowledge, creation and God. But only a metaphor, light is not God. Though some of the scientific claims made seemed overdone to me, I was willing to just let them go, here, because soon I was to run into one of my pet peeves concerning modern physics. My pet peeve is the use of 1970's physics speculations as evidence for the universe having aspects that do not fit into daily experience. These get expanded into some pretty specific claims to support such esoteric religious notions as a God who is aware of and sends knowledge to all parts of the universe at once.

Part II is a thoughtful, interesting, and even hopeful discussion of several chapters on, first, what the current situation is, with respect to the conflict between scientism versus religion. This includes looking at several key individuals who led the science revolution and recent developments that are calling their scientistic pronouncements into question. It also includes an overview of progress in three sciences that is calling previously those disciplines' fondly held scientistic dogmas into question. This leads to a discussion of the ground rules for détente, with a caution against the rather typical co-opting of religion that takes place when science gets to define religion's limitations.

The second theme in Part II looks at what is ubiquitous and unchanging in the religious landscape, in terms of insights regarding the nature of the spiritual realm and the Transcendence of God. The hierarchical structure of the spirit-filled universe, with the greater emanating into the lesser, rather than the greater magically appearing out of the lesser as in scientism, is discussed in a very comprehensive mapping of the major cosmologies of the spirit according to the world's religions. This is Huston Smith's area of unique expertise, and it is very interesting material. It does

show a certain unity of religious, traditional thought, once one assigns some filtering mechanisms that show that some traditions' assertions just attempt to describe a more limited part of the whole. This leads to a discussion of the different spiritual personality types, the ways they perceive spiritual realities, and the self-imposed limits of their perceptions of reality. The discussion agrees with my personal prejudice by having the mystical personality on the top and seeing the greater spiritual reality. This suggests that the mystical visionaries of the world's religions describe the same larger realities, and selected quotations from a few key mystics are used to support that suggestion.

Finally Smith cautiously launches into his own beliefs, based on all of his knowledge of world religions, yes, but also his very personal spiritual sensibilities and insights. The book ends with an Epilogue that is, in essence, an open letter to scientific worldview holders to engage in dialogue. The last several chapters are very personal, very heartfelt statements. I felt bad for feeling critical when reading them.

Along the way through this part I felt compelled to take notes where I felt some level of discomfort and disagreement. I suppose I should have also taken notes on things I very much agreed with, but there was a lot of that and the mood wasn't right. Plus, if I did that you would not go read the book for yourself and form your own opinion, it would all be here.

NOT TO WORRY: RELIGION IS SECURE

I found it strangely comforting when Smith asserted that after all the evidence for religion being seriously and purposely marginalized in Western societies, to the detriment of those societies, that religion was not at all threatened in terms of its very existence. On pages 148 and 149 Smith says:

Seen through the eyes of faith, religion's future is secure. As long as there are human beings, there will be religion for the sufficient reason that the self is a theomorphic creature—one whose *morphe* (form) is *theos*—God encased within it. Having been created in the *imago Dei*, the image of God, all human beings have a God-shaped vacuum built into their hearts. Since nature abhors a vacuum, people keep trying to fill the one inside them. Searching for an image of the divine that will fit, they paw over various options as if they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, matching them successively to the gaping hole at the puzzle's center. . . . They keep doing this until the right "piece" is found. When it slips into place, life's jigsaw puzzle is found.

How so? Because the sight of the picture that then emerges is so commanding that it swings attention from the self who is viewing the picture to the picture itself. This epiphany, with its attendant ego-reduction, is *salvation* in the West and *enlightenment* in the East. The divine self-forgetfulness it accomplishes amounts to graduating from the human condition, but the achievement in no way threatens the human future. Other generations await in the wings, eager to have a go at life's curriculum.

Smith explains that this hopeful view is faith-oriented, the world-oriented more pessimistic outlook that seeks to continually diminish religion co-exists with it. The use of the terms salvation and enlightenment I will return to in a more critical mode later. However, the quandary this whole statement left me with is this: my own experience says it is true. But it has been sequentially true for me. The hole within changes shape and size over time. As a young child I was a heartfelt Christian with little notion of God except I genuinely cried contemplating Christ's sacrifice. As a young adult I was drawn to Mormonism's perfected man as God, and felt empowered by the prospect of Godhood. To my surprise,

Smith says this is also taught in Christianity at large (p. 31): "God became man that man might become God." Perhaps the Mormons take it more literally, as reflected in their mantra that: "As man is, God once was; As God is, man may become."

Then as an older adult I have become uncomfortable with what once fit snugly, and look to the ecstatic pronouncements of mystics for the description of the larger, more diffuse God-concept that now feels right. So, the idea of salvation in finding the puzzle piece that fits has to be revisited to check that fit from time to time, and sometimes the search for the perfect match has to be restarted, in my experience. To tell the truth, as I read Smith's description of spiritual personality types I sense that I have made a circle that looped through several in the middle, and am now bipolar: part of me is atheist, part of me is mystic. The first is my intellectual way of knowing, the second reflects my intuitive way of knowing.

INTELLECT VERSUS INTUITION?

According to XXX, my having different worldviews depending on whether I consult my intellect or my intuition is not uncommon, but it is an internal rift that needs to be healed. With that advice gnawing at me, I was pleased to see in Smith's book that at some time in the past there was a more holistic notion about these two ways of knowing. Smith discusses the issue of intellect and intuition on pages 253 and 264.

On page 253:

> **Sufis respect their ecstatics, referring to them affectionately as spiritual drunkards who hang out in God's tavern; but they hold in higher regard those who can see God everywhere while they are sober—which is to say in daily life. This requires considerable reflective talent, though we must**

> **never forget that in matters spiritual, thinking comes closer to seeing than to reasoning. Reasoning brings indirect knowledge (knowledge *about*), whereas intuition brings direct knowledge (knowledge *of*). The latter causes thoughts to circle their objects, spiraling around them conically until in a flash of insight they penetrate their objects like a drill.**

On page 264 Smith is discussion the artificial divide between conscience and spirit, with science saying conscience is a property derived from and thus dependent on matter, and religion saying, to the contrary, that conscience "is instead the initial glimpse we have of Spirit," meaning the superior Source from which our individual spirit derives itself, which is independent of matter. Where the intellect/intuition split comes into this discussion is Smith's assertion that in ancient times, when the worldview was more like the traditional worldview, philosophers did not recognize the "subject-object split" of modernity. As proof he cites Hilary Armstrong saying about Plotinus that: . . . "the Intellect (a technical term) 'is the level of intuitive thought that is identical with its object and does not see it as in some sense external.'"

This makes the intellect something more limited within a larger intuitive thought process. This fits my hard won insight that "I am not my intellect, it is my tool for being effective in this world, but it is only my tool, it is not who I am." It does, however, suggest that my ability to divorce one from the other and come up with the widely diverging worldviews is, perhaps, a problem needing a solution. It is a form of spiritual/mental bi-polar dis-ease, perhaps?

Smith offers a cure on page 193, which consists of firmly grasping and recognizing the limitations of science. It is simply not a competent authority in matters of the spirit. He describes the tension already existing in my mind this less personal way:

Two worldviews, the traditional and the scientific, compete for the mind of the third millennium. (E.O. Wilson's wording of this first of my two sentences is, "The choice between transcendentalism and empiricism will be the coming century's version of the struggle for men's minds.") If we had our choice, we would prefer the traditional worldview; and we do have that choice, because neither of them can be proved to be truer than the other.

The support for that last assertion lies in understanding science's limitations, for only if we have those clearly in mind can we see that science has no lien on the traditional outlook. Science obviously has a better grasp of the calculable features of the physical universe, but whether those features comprise all that exists cannot be scientifically determined.

This I have no argument with, and it would be the key to bridging my intellect-intuition divide except for one thing: which version of the traditional worldview? Like a department store offers many brands of articles serving the same purpose, like shirts, they come in abundant variety. The one that fits me best at present is a very limited distillation of the 'God is all' vision of a selected few of the ecstatic mystics, with very, very little else in the way of derivative statements of belief concerning reality, God, afterlife, etc. That is not a traditional worldview. Or is it? If so, I can consider myself healed and be on my way.

MODERN PHYSICS, ONCE AGAIN

Smith believes we are not going deeper into his metaphorical tunnel in large part because of discoveries regarding the nature of light and its creative power, and by the discovery of nonlocality. These are lights, not at the end of his metaphorical tunnel, but at the beginning of it, we may be turning back and pulling our heads out,

so to speak. These points are made on pages 135, 137-140, and 174-178.

To be fair, Smith acknowledges on page 178 that there is no agreement on the implications of the experiments used to support nonlocality, and his informants on this topic are proud to be mavericks. Smith's enthusiasm is seen on pages 174-175:

> **It is starting to look as if physics is out of the tunnel already. I sat that on the authority of the EPR (Einstein—Podolsky—Rosen) experiment, which establishes that the universe is nonlocal. Separated parts of it—how widely they are separated makes no difference; it could be from here to the rim of the universe—are simultaneously in touch with one another. In lay language, what the EPR experiment demonstrates is that if you separate two interacting particles and give one of them a down spin, instantly the other will spin upward.**
>
> **The theoretical consequences of this finding are revolutionary—sufficiently so for Henry Stapp of the University of California, Berkeley, to call it "*the* most important finding of science, ever," for it relegates space, time, and matter (the matrices of the world we normally know) to provisional status.**

Smith goes on and on and then enthuses:

> **The moment of truth in the EPR experiment puts a rift in the cloud of unknowing through which physicists catch sight of another world, or at least another reality.**

Sorry, but the EPR experiment was a THOUGHT-EXPERIMENT, not a physical experiment. It was a "what if this were the outcome" mental exercise to which parties agreed that if it came

out this way it would show there is action at a distance, a "spooky" thing Einstein did not believe in. What made the thought experiment work was the theoretical idea that properties, such as spin, at the subatomic level, which is a combination of wave and physical matter properties, did not exist until measured: the measurement caused the property.

A scientist named Bell, decades later, finally designed the physical experiment that mimics the EPR thought-experiment. Sure enough, when two linked particles were split and set on opposite courses, when the spin of one was measured at the source, the spin of the other, measured along its trajectory, was the opposite. The interpretation? Most physicists see no evidence of nonlocality. What may be the case is that linked particles have spins that cancel each other by being opposites, and when separated and sent away fro each other these properties simply persist being the opposites of each other. This most important scientific discovery is being investigated for use in sending secret messages, since only the sender will be able to say what the spin of the particle is at the receiver, it is a marvelous random-property generation technique foe a signal. Pretty pedestrian stuff, really, unless one makes it dogma that no properties exist in subatomic particles until they are measured, which is nonsense since we are made of such particles, they existed with real properties before we woke up and started making measurements.

In the middle of his unbridled enthusiasm for 1960's and 1970's speculative physics he takes a swipe at the New Age movement which has adopted this same nonlocality phenomenon, as evidenced by Bell's experiment, as proof of some of their similarly cosmic claims.

Smith says the New Age will never amount to much, but has two things exactly right (p. 161):

> **Flaky at the fringes and credulous to the point of gullibility—an open mind is salutary, but one whose hinge is off?—the New Age movement is so problematic that I would gladly leave it alone were it not for the fact that it has two things exactly right. First, it is optimistic, and we need all the hope we can get. Second, it adamantly refuses to acquiesce in the scientistic worldview. Instinctively it *knows* that the human spirit is too large to accept a cage for its home.**

Elsewhere Smith described the New Age as polytheistic (p. 237) and with being naïve about modern physics having discovered God (p. 176). To me, Smith is just as naïve about modern physics. I'll return to the New Age a little later.

SUSPICIONS RAISED IN THE CALL FOR SCIENCE/RELIGION PEACE

In describing his terms for peace between science and religion, Smith makes two very reasonable statements followed by an example that raised at least one of my eyebrows (pages 200-201):

> **. . . both parties should respect the other's sphere of competence. It would be unrealistic not to expect border disputes to erupt; but they should be negotiated in good faith without losing sight of the terms of the agreement. When scientists who are convinced materialists deny the existence of things other than those they can train their instruments on, they should make it clear that they are expressing their personal opinions like everybody else and do not claim the authority of science for what they say. From the other side, religionists should keep their hands off science as long as it is genuine science and not laced with philosophical opinions to**

which everyone has rights. All responsible citizens have a right to oppose harmful outcomes that some scientific research could lead to—germ warfare, cloning, and the like—but that is an ethical matter, not one that relates to science proper.

Smith suggests rightly that this would entitle religion to a respected ontological domain that lies outside the domain science can detect and study. However, the examples given of ethically questionable science is where I raised an eyebrow: "cloning, and the like" for instance suggests to me an attempt to protect the religious world from questions nibbling at the very meaning of human sentience. There is a whole scientific movement that sees sentience as something that occurs naturally when a sufficiently complex physical plant exists to allow the needed information storage and processing. Therefore, machine intelligence and even sentience is anticipated. Cloning is a step into the same arena since it suggests that there is nothing special about the natural way of producing a human being. Smith shows a keen awareness of this machine-intelligence expectation with a hilarious quote from a science-fiction book by Terry Bisson in which a visiting race of non-biological entities just can't get over the fact that earth is populated with sentient beings made of meat. The last line is worth repeating here (p. 184):

"Thinking meat! You're asking me to believe in thinking meat!"

"Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat! The meat is the whole deal!"

THE SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY AND ETHICS

I quite enjoyed and largely bought into Smith's spiritual hierarchy arguments with atheists at the bottom, polytheists next,

monotheists above that level, and mystics above them all, who in turn had a modified monotheism: God is everywhere. But one claim, regarding ethics, just blew me away. It was on page 248:

> **Ethics enters as a corollary of passionate love when it is directed to God the creator, who "has the whole world in his hands." God loves the creatures she creates as if they were her children, so if we love God we will love them too. Ethics is absent from polytheism. It is inseparable from monotheism.**

This is a problematically black and white declaration, in my opinion, for two reasons. First is the large overlap between polytheism and monotheism, as described by Smith. On his page 246 it was observed that . . . "the Monotheist's God often turns up in the background of the Polytheist's world." And on page 242: "Polytheists are found within institutional churches (whose theology is almost invariably monotheistic) as well as outside them." Smith gives examples from the Catholic tradition and observes that the real difference is temperamental and not institutional. "The polytheist is interested in the supernatural not for its own sake but for its involvement with this world." The point is that superstitious people who venerate and appeal to saints and fear evil spirits are part of monotheistic churches.

The second problem with this declaration is the fact, in my opinion, that monotheism has fueled the exlusiveness that has fed cultural conquests of native peoples in the name of religion, outright wars of religion, the Inquisition, and smaller scale violence that persists right into the present day. Intolerance is rather easily fed by having a strong relationship with the Biblical God it seems to me. In the modern Western world it is a very large proportion of the monotheistic Christians who are looking forward to a Parousia. This is the event of Christ's return in glory where they are taken up into heaven because they believed right. That is nice but they

will watch as all those who have failed to believe correctly are cleansed from the world by God agents of destruction.

This is all very Biblical, but it shows a callousness toward fellow human beings that boggles the mind. Even those who do not believe in this literal event and see it as a symbolic one are apparently fine with billions being denied salvation because over time they either rejected Christ or never heard of him. This is also a very non-loving way to see one's fellow sentient beings. In fact it is a great stumbling block to Smith, a block that was removed, as he explains on his pages 269 and 270. It was removed by his hearing a personal revelation related by a Greek Orthodox missionary who had been working in India for two decades! The missionary explained that he knew in his heart that Paul's vision of the third heaven originally included the fact of universal salvation. However, that inspired insight was not included in the broadcast version because . . . "the uncomprehending would take it as a license for irresponsibility. If they are going to be saved eventually, why bother?"

Smith was really impressed by this account and it became his own revelation it seems. Living with the idea of so much of humanity being forever damned was very difficult for Smith, very callous.

A similarly and related callous attitude toward fellow humans is the typical Christian acceptance of the fact of eternal damnation, in hell, of those billions, including most of their neighbors, who failed to believe properly whether by choice or by lack of opportunity (born in wrong time and/or place). Smith makes the point three separate times in his book (pages 36, 268, and 269) that hell is temporary and is a cleansing operation, like purgatory. One exits the process at some point clean and ready for residence in a place of great purity, and all eventually receive their own Happy Ending. In essence this is what I was taught as a Mormon, with a slight

twist of higher degrees of glory for those who believed and obeyed, but with the idea that even the lowest heaven was not revealed because once having seen it people may kill themselves to get there. But whether one heard of and exercised faith in Christ in this life, or not until the next, was not a basis for assignment to hell, even temporarily.

THE SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY AND THE CHANGING OF MY GODS

Smith's descriptions of "the four regions of reality" in his Chapter 14 on 'The Big Picture" together with his delineation of four corresponding spiritual personality types in the following chapter allowed me to recapitulate some of my own history. The idea is that there are four stories in the reality building with floors that are mirrors when viewed from below and perfectly transparent when viewed from above. So the three levels above the atheist look down and say yes, I can see why with your limited vision you see only what you see. The atheist looks up and sees only himself in his own world.

The monotheist looks down at the polytheist with his or her spirits dwelling in everything and affecting everything and sees that there is but one God, but sure, there are spirits, subservient to God or malignant and temporarily allowed to fight against God. The polytheist may attempt to placate these spirits, or influence them, but the monotheist recognizes that the key to mastery lies with the One God, ad prays to him/her alone, or occasionally asks a particular saint to speak to the One God for him or her.

In the top story the mystic sees God everywhere and in everything, all is One, all is God. Looking down the mystic sees that the world of matter and of spirits and of the One God are all parts of the One, the All.

When I read through this I thought I recognized something in myself. As a firm monotheist, Mormon, I began to feel confined by the perfected man is God concept, and ran across a discourse simply called "God" by a Mormon apostle, Brigham H. Roberts. I remember how my enthusiasm for my religion flared up again when I read in that discourse that sure, God was who and what Mormons thought, but God is also much more, much more than can be described in words, in fact. He described the Transcendent God of Smith's mystics, and said this is also God. In other words, he stood as it were in Smith's fourth story and looked down at the third and said in effect: "both visions of God are true, simultaneously, and focusing exclusively on the one or the other fails to fully appreciate God." I was thrilled.

I was so thrilled, in fact that I wrote a tome to celebrate what I had discovered. I will attach it with a link here. But by the time I had written the tome of celebration I had already, again, begun to change inside. I wanted to focus on the Transcendent God, exclusively, I could no longer accept that other, personal God-aspect as having meaning for me. So, even though I enjoyed the integrated and amalgamated view from the fourth story for a while, the clear flooring turned opaque to me, and my God-concept changed yet again. I am much more comfortable with the Transcendent God of some of the mystics who say God is so utterly ineffable that even the word God itself is so limited as to be idolatrous. I don't want to mess that vision up with these more materialistic, more anthro-centric, and in my estimation lesser, visions of God.

PARTAKING OF THE MUSHROOM OF PEACE?

As I wrote the paragraph above I realized I was in the process of unraveling the unity I had just achieved a couple of pages ago where I discussed intellect and intuition. I am restricting myself to

the panentheistic (God in all and all in God) aspect of Elkhart's God, which Smith calls "Godhead" on his page 220. I am dropping the parallel aspect of the Divine that Smith calls "God" on the same page to indicate that the personal and the transcendental God both exist at the same time. By doing this, am I letting go of Smith's model of the Spirit emanating into humans to cause our spirit, to create our consciousness, from the Divine above? Maybe so, maybe not.

By recognizing only the ineffable 'Godhead' defined by Smith I am in fact closer to Steven Pinker's model of consciousness arising from matter when it is configured in a certain complex way. I get there by invoking Jung, of whose insights Smith says on page 242:

> **One of the appeals of Jungianism is that it allows people to indulge their polytheistic proclivities while remaining culturally respectable. It accomplishes this by transplanting gods and goddesses from the external world into the collective unconscious. . . .**

When I allow that, as Jung has suggested, the God-archetype has been hard-wired into my physical makeup (perhaps by God?), to create this God-need that both Jung and Smith see as a fact, I am reminded of the lowly mushroom.

I am like the forest floor, I have had spores built into me that will activate as I develop through receiving enough food, water, warmth and light. Microscopic filaments will grow in all directions. When the incoming moisture, warmth, light and food are just right, my filaments change and grow into a fruiting body that becomes visible to others, and may be picked for their next dinner. I added that to make light of this seemingly heavy analogue discussion.

The point, of course, is that if my physical makeup includes programming for a God-need spore, then when my growth (requiring food, water, warmth and light) is sufficient, filaments will spread. These filaments, as I continue to grow, await the right conditions to expand my self into a fully conscious being capable of reaching out to and connecting with the Spirit that implanted the spore into my matter in the first place.

Is this a way to make Pinker right, but simply limited in terms of his vision as befits an inhabitant of the first floor in the spiritual-reality tower? I would agree with both Pinker and Smith. There is no way for science, or the human mind, to get at the ultimate truth of this matter. But there is no reason to call each other names. Pass the mushroom. Make peace.

THE NEW AGE AND NON-RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY

Smith's observations about the New Age movement, which he rightly describes as unfocused and unorganized, thus ineffective as a mass movement, misses a very large point. I gained some insight and experience spending several years participating in and occasionally contributing lesson materials to several New Age discussion and counseling groups on the Internet (see my tribute to a special friend, whose discussion group I was a happy participant in by clicking here). I saw people gain self confidence, and go from writing apologetic, wimpish, downtrodden, self-doubting notes to becoming co-discussion leaders, and teachers of others!

This is the same phenomenon I saw in converts when I was a believing Mormon, starting with myself. The religion empowered me, put me squarely in charge of my life. The New Age counselors I was happy to be tolerated by did the same thing. It is as powerful as any religion, maybe more powerful then some because it

partakes more of the "conservative" mind set, knowing whereof it speaks with some certainty stemming from personal spiritual experience. The more mature, in my opinion, realize that there is no one to one correspondence between spiritual reality and the words and symbols of the world we live in. There are fundamentalists in the movement, however, who believe they know everything, have assigned a name to everything, and have created their own spiritual-reality lingo. These at times try to enforce some sort of homemade orthodoxy on others. Their web sites, and books, I avoid like the plague.

In this same vein of spirituality without religion, on`page 255 Smith makes a statement that cut me to the quick. I already referred to it. It is Monica Lewinski answering a question about whether she felt guilt over her sexual relationship with President Bill Clinton. She apparently squirmed with discomfort and then said: "I am not very religious. I am more spiritual."

So, what is wrong with that? The fact that Lewinsky said it? Many others also say it. Me, for one. But Smith is trying to make the point that this is wrongheaded, there are sins attributable to religion, sure, but:

> **Enter the word *spirituality* to name (without specification) what is good about religion.**

Smith agrees that spirituality "is no more than a human attribute" so it can be separated from religious societies per se. But then he proceeds to show in the rest of the chapter that it is from the spiritual within the world's religions that we learn about the nature of the spirit and the spiritual dimension of life and afterlife. He "defiantly" stands with the traditionalists (religious) (p. 260) and leads into his very personal beliefs using the literature produced by those traditionalists.

But not unlike the New Agers he decries, he selects from the religions he so admires as from a smorgasbord.

SMITH'S PERSONAL BELIEFS ABOUT SURVIVING DEATH

Smith, in his very last and very personal statement on his own beliefs about his own survival after death makes three points I have wrestled with as well. Smith, looking at the various explanations of survival after death in the world's religions, believes they may all be correct and we may be given a choice concerning them. I have read the near-death experience literature and had the same thought: maybe one sees and experiences what one longs for and expects.

On his pages 270 and 271 Smith suggests he may retain continuity with this life for a time, in terms of his awareness. Then he may turn his attention to the beatific vision, and retain his awareness oh his own personality as long as it interests him to do so. At some later time of his choosing he may then cut himself free from these tethers and stop seeing the sunset as an observer and instead become absorbed into it. These are highly personal observations. I find myself agreeing that this is a good way to picture the evolution of the soul or spirit, it certainly pays homage to the veracity of every religious tradition. It does not partake of some of the materialism in the literalistic interpretation of the Muslim view of heaven, neither is it compatible with the eternally physical heaven of the Mormons, but it respects the mainline, more spiritualized heaven-concepts of the major religions of the world. As Smith observes, his final fate is fittingly compatible with the unity visions of many mystics from every tradition. This comes as no surprise since Smith has already described the mystic as the most highly developed of the four types of human beings in his spiritual hierarchy on his pages 250-254. I agree in principle with this

hierarchy and am a great fan of selected mystic visionaries of the Christian (Medieval Catholic) and Muslim (Medieval Sufi) traditions, as Smith himself is. He twice cites words of my absolute favorite source: Rumi. Their visions speak to my soul.

Although I find myself pretty well agreeing with his personal bottom line, it cherry-picks from the teachings of the world's major religions and adds in some of his own spiritual insights to modify portions of those teachings that were troublesome to him. I found that interesting, but also disappointing. Why disappointing? Because it confirmed to me what I was suspecting more and more as the book proceeded: Smith is in favor of restoring the role of religion in Western society, to place it in the heart of that society as it lies in his heart. Good. But he suggests through his own example that it should be a modified religion from what passes for religion today. It should not teach an exclusive patent on what God requires for salvation, nor should it make an exclusive claim to posses Truth. It should be modified to delete the idea of selective salvation and eternal hell. Salvation should be redefined as spiritual enlightenment through personal revelation of the Divine. All religions should be accepted as teaching some variant of the truth mixed with nonessentials that set them apart from one another, sometimes with unfortunate consequences. It should be, in my opinion, a slightly more coherent version of the New Age movement, which passes all these tests with flying colors.

A DISAPPOINTING BOTTOM LINE

Smith argues for a theology not in keeping with any existing major religions. How is that respecting religion? Smith's religious beliefs are sensible to me, I like them, but I can see now that his book will not appeal to the audience he is addressing and will not be seen as representing the views of many of those he is defending. And it is because of the latter, which I see as a fact, that the book will not

succeed in creating détente between scientism and religion. Many scientists will appreciate the book and believe its assertions to a large extent. But just as they are aware of scientism fanatics in the scientific community, they are also aware of religiosity in the religious community: fanatical believers who hold their religion as an object, an idol, rather than as a flexile means for obtaining spiritual transformation.

The book fails to come to grips with the true believers of the fundamentalist persuasion who brook no compromise on their 6 days of creation and may contemplate violence to make the world more obedient to God and stave off judgement. This has Biblical and historical roots with the Hebrews practicing a form of ethnic cleansing, including killing their own when they fell into idolatry. The Mormons consulted the Old Testament to read the rules of war when they felt faced with an enemy camped at Mountain Meadows in Utah just over a century ago. The Radical Anabaptists in Muenster read the same scriptures 300 years before that and instituted a theocratical reign of terror. It is no secret that radical Islamists today are similarly motivated when seeking to bring the Great Satan to its knees through terror.

Smith hopes that the nice religions will prevail, ones who have deep spiritual convictions yet are tolerant in the best sense of the term. Fat chance. Social Darwinism may result in the survival of those not so nice, and Smith himself noted the rise of fundamentalist religions, ones who provided more security, while others who are more mainstream, who play nicer, fail to retain their adherents.

PERSONAL BOTTOM LINE

So, at the end of the book, what do I think of it? I am pleased to learn that in many ways I have developed the same sense of human nature and the spirit/Spirit as Huston Smith. He is good company.

We differ on some minor points, but all in all, "we could be siblings yet."

I am disappointed by several things related to that first reaction: I learned little I didn't already either know or feel concerning the evidences available to support belief in a Spirit and humanity's spiritual component.

I feel to laugh at what to me is an apparent contradiction at a very fundamental level that underlies almost the entire book. Spirit lies outside the scope of science, I agree. But then much energy devoted to begging (my caricature) scientists to allow the believer to house his or her belief in the as yet unknown, but perhaps not forever unknowable, margin of material unknowing. This is like a believer begging the academy of scientism for permission to believe! Smith chose to lodge spirit in or in similitude of the unexplained aspects of the photon. I am guilty of the exact same thing by suggesting that what we consider spiritual could have a physical basis in the 23 orders of magnitude between the size of the smallest known "particle" and the absolute limit suggested by Planck's constant. It takes one to know one. But at least I have an excuse in that for years I believed in a revelatory statement by Joseph Smith which said there was no such thing as immaterial matter, spirit is matter, but more refined than can be detected by our senses.

Joseph Smith said matter could neither be created nor destroyed. So does this Huston Smith, but with a modern caveat of matter being able to change into energy and back again. Thermodynamics says that unless unusual circumstances prevail, such as may exist in experiments or specific regions of space, once it is converted to energy it is *asta la vista* matter. So, both Smiths need some additional caveats, but so do we all.

In one other area I had to smile at Smith for doing something I have also done in part as he has. As he described his preference for an Eastern religion to an Eastern Orthodox theologian, and that he particularly needed a religion that promised universal salvation, that theologian told him of his own personal revelation. That revelation expanded on the third-heaven part of a revelation related by Paul, which originally included a statement of universal salvation. But in publication that statement was withheld to stop persons from living wantonly knowing it would all come out the same in the end. Immediately, it seems, Smith returned to his own religious tradition, in part. In part does not tell the story right, but both Smith and I developed greater respect for the traditions of our younger years as we first tossed them aside and then began to understand they did indeed have a deeper wisdom in them than we knew.

This illustrates two points. First, to make Christianity acceptable to some of us, additional revelation is needed to modify some of its more onerous beliefs, which turn out to be its core beliefs. I believe I could be a good Christian if it returned to the time and place when Ebionite beliefs were being reworked by some early Gnostic visionaries, for example. This is the time when the living were baptized for the dead, the requirement of a dedicated life was in place, and ecstatic revelation was an entitlement fore the faithful. Later Pauline Christianity, in comparison, especially as seen through modern Protestant eyes, leaves me cold.

Second, there are truths not meant for public dissemination because the rank and file are not spiritually mature enough to handle it. This is rank elitism but consistent with practices in some parts of early Christianity, Gnosticism and early Mormonism (and I am sure in other examples as well, these are just the ones I am familiar with through my own readings, obviously). In these traditions, at least in their formative years, revelation continued,

paths to saving those who were not able to choose belief were opened, and some revealed knowledge was withheld until the believer had proved him- or her-self to be mature and trustworthy.

Reading Smith's book has let me know he is thoughtful believer with whose vision my vision has much in common. No doubt his book will be dismissed as being just another heretic's musings by most true-believing Christians. No doubt the New Agers he makes just a few positive statements about will see him as defending the value of the knowledge that is his expertise. No doubt most scientists will never bother to read the book, and if they do read it will see that he is naive about science. But so what. He has done what we all do. He has collected all the information he can collect and charted a course through it all that he calls his current beliefs. He si just like you and I. Just more widely read and studied.