

Engaging Huston Smith's **Why Religion Matters**

A SETBACK TO THE DIALOGUE:
RESPONSE TO HUSTON SMITH

by Ursula Goodenough

Abstract. Huston Smith's book, *Why Religion Matters*, offers an eloquent evocation of mystical sensibility. Unfortunately, along the way, he offers a strongly negative and often inaccurate account of the scientific worldview, the claim being that the science is laying siege to the spiritual.

Keywords: emergence; mysticism; science; scientism.

In *Why Religion Matters*, Huston Smith uses three-fourths of his book to tell us why the modern alternative to religion—which he calls scientism—is the root cause of our current human discontent and then moves, in the final pages, to an evocation of the religious life, with particular eloquence for the worldview of the mystic. Because I am a scientist, and because Smith is familiar with some of my positions on these matters, and because he invited me to be on this panel of reviewers, I assume that he is interested in having a good exchange on his views. Therefore, I offer a response that I hope will elicit dialogue not only among panel members but also with those in the audience.

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Let me begin, inasmuch as this is my field, with a response to Smith's understanding of the status of neo-Darwinism in the scientific worldview. Smith correctly quotes from books that claim that Darwinian theory is in disarray, that "the evidence for evolution is extraordinarily thin." The problem is that the books from which he quotes are themselves polemical works that were written to make this very point and have therefore biased the argument to the point of distortion. What is extraordinarily thin is the evidence introduced in these books for the lacunae in evolutionary theory. In fact, the neo-Darwinian paradigm has never been more robustly supported. It is documented by overwhelming empirical evidence, with perhaps the most complete fossil and DNA-based data of all being those that document human evolution from simian ancestors. The data do not rule out theistic influence over the evolutionary process—for example, one is free to hold the belief that key mutations, or all mutations for that matter, have been guided and only appear to be random. But to argue for a nonevolutionary hypothesis is no longer a coherent option, and by doing so Smith has regrettably introduced incoherence into his argument.

Smith's perspectives on scientism, while not incoherent, seem distorted as well. He has amassed pages of quotations from various writers, some but not all scientists, and many (such as Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche) who wrote in bygone cultural contexts, which suggest that the scientific worldview renders the humanities and religion obsolete. He then uses these perspectives to argue that the angst of our times can be laid at the doormat of scientific "idolatry," offering such invective as "science swallows the world," "science has shown itself unable to coexist with anything," and "the sunset for the empire of science has arrived." In fact, one could assemble an equal volume of quotations from equally prominent persons who point out that our scientific understandings do not answer, indeed do not address, many of the questions that human beings ask about themselves and their lives. Smith elects to quote only one such passage, from science writer Timothy Ferris, who defines scientism as "the belief that science provides not a path to the truth, but the only path" and who then states that "we ought to muster the sophistication to recognize such claims as hyperbolic. Scientism today is advocated by only a tiny minority of scientists." Smith responds by being "astonished at how blind those inside the scientific worldview are to the scientism that others find riddling modernism throughout." For what it's worth, I side with Ferris.

If we go beyond all this name calling—and it goes without saying that Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, Carl Sagan, and E. O. Wilson all get their due—to the real matter at hand, what I hear Smith to be saying is that he finds the scientific cosmology unappealing. Early in the book he offers an eloquent paragraph on its key features, and he gives passing nods of approval elsewhere, but one feels that one is hearing his real position on the scientific worldview in passages such as these:

In restricting consciousness (which is as close to spirit as science gets) to attributes of conscious organisms, it turns spirit into tiny rivulets on a single planet in a desert approximately fifteen billion light-years across. (p. 28)

Organisms [are] that razor-thin veneer on the world of dead matter. (p. 48)

Apart from organic life, purposelessness reigns. (p. 48)

The scientific worldview is “out of the running” as a human home, and what disqualifies it for that role is the way it strips the objective world of its qualities. (p. 44)

As for the scientific worldview, there is no way that a happy ending can be worked into it. Death is the grim reaper of individual lives, and whether things as a whole will end in a freeze or a fry, with a bang or a whimper (or keep on cranking out more insentient matter in an expanding universe) is anybody’s guess. (p. 30)

True or not, the traditional (religious) worldview is transparently intelligible. The scientific worldview is not. Final causes being categorically excluded from it, it necessarily dead-ends in questions that have no answers. (p. 227)

The language of science is not a natural language. . . . It is an artificial language that cannot accommodate the human spirit. (p. 62)

Well, as always, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. In my book *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Goodenough 1998), I see things very differently, celebrating the intelligibility and grandeur of the scientific worldview and lifting up its abundant resources for spiritual orientation. Smith categorizes this book as in the lineage of efforts to “sweeten the sour apple.” To his mind, the awe and reverence that I describe in reflecting on Nature is “no more than a post-it, so to speak, affixed to a nature of [*sic*] that is unaware of being so bedecked. . . . What is in the depths of nature—its deep structure on which human sentience bobs like a rose petal on the sea—is insentient, quantifiable matter” (pp. 32–33).

This is an unusual reading of my book, given that eleven of its twelve chapters focus not on “insentient quantifiable matter” but on the organisms that have emerged from this matter via biological evolution. But the problem proves to run deeper, for Smith later dismisses emergence as an explanatory tool. “Darwinists,” he writes, “consider it a proven fact that novel qualities—life, sentience, and self-consciousness—can derive from the rearrangement of elements that themselves lack those qualities. The explanation that is offered for how these rabbits appear out of hats is to say that they emerge. What that explanation overlooks is that ‘emergence’ is a descriptive, not an explanatory concept. It explains nothing” (p. 257).

It is here that I must pause and truly take exception. Let us first define *emergence*. The best thumbnail definition I have come upon is that emergence is “something more from nothing but.” To give an example from biological evolution: A nonmotile cell might have two types of proteins that do various things in the cell but fail to interact with one another. One gene mutation later, they may interact in such a way that they slide past

one another and the cell can move. We now have something more (motility) from nothing but (the two proteins). Motility is the emergent property, but it is not a “rabbit out of a hat.” We can demonstrate that it is brought about by *nothing but* the sliding of the two proteins. The concept of emergence is both descriptive and explanatory.

Nor is it just Darwinists who speak of emergence. Emergence is a hallmark understanding in all of science. The scientific view of matter is not that it is “dead.” Rather, matter is pregnant with possibility, and the interactions of matter with itself are creative, contingent, surprising, and emergent. To give an example: Emergent from thermonuclear fusions within enormous stars were new kinds of atoms—carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen—atoms that had never before existed in the universe, atoms with new properties, properties in turn essential for the emergence and evolution of life as we know it. Carbon (something more) emerges from the thermonuclear fusion of 3 helium-4 nuclei (nothing but). Again, the concept is both descriptive and explanatory.

We can now return to our topic and consider what it is that Smith regards as an explanatory concept.

Smith offers his explanations—what he calls “The Big Picture”—in the closing sections of his book, and for the most part The Big Picture entails traditional hierarchical concepts: an omniscient personal God, a this-world/other-world duality, top-down causation, and a “body-shedding” eternal afterlife bathed in consciousness. To buttress this perspective he quotes Ken Wilber’s comment that such a hierarchical worldview is “so overwhelmingly widespread that it is either the single greatest intellectual error ever to appear in human history—an error so colossally widespread as to literally stagger the mind—or it is the most accurate reflection of reality to have appeared” (p. 226). I would certainly agree that it is the most accurate reflection of human religious aspirations ever to have appeared. However, human consensus does not generate reality. Were it able to do so, the sun would have taken to orbiting the earth some time ago.

As if cognizant of this problem, Smith concludes his book with an effort to integrate his worldview with the scientific view of reality:

I turn now to indicate how things might look when Spirit [his synonym for God] is taken to be fundamental to the world. (Is there any reason for thinking that consciousness, or sentience, or awareness . . . is less fundamental than matter?) . . . I begin with what Plato would call a likely tale. What if, in the Big Bang, it was Infinite Omniscience that exploded. . . . Chronologically, the sequence begins with the meagerest possible existences that become increasingly complex as time proceeds. But note that in this scenario intelligence is present in those microscopic entities at the very start—there is a Buddha in every grain of sand. . . . Sentience is everywhere.

And though in the smallest things God’s omnipresent omniscience is veiled under the thickest conceivable veil, the tiniest bit of sentience that surfaces in those things is of a kind with omniscience and is backed by it. Why do not particles content themselves with being just what they are—particles? Whence comes

this drive towards complexity which leads (on this planet we know firsthand) to plants, animals, and rationality? Because intelligence is actively working to free itself from its stifling veils and give itself more elbow room for movement in the finite world. That is why tacit knowledge comes together and serves us so well. Its components (under the final direction of the omniscience that orchestrates everything) are up to something, that “something” being their working for the greater largess. (pp. 255–56)

So, Smith too would seem to be engaged in sweetening the sour apple, not by regarding matter and its biological emergence with reverence and awe but by endowing matter itself with such positive qualities as sentience, intelligence, and purpose, properties that are initially thickly veiled but somehow become less so as they work for the greater largess. There are, of course, scientific understandings of why particles do not content themselves with being just particles, understandings based on the four forces of physics and the thermodynamic conditions of the universe. This is not to say that science claims to understand where the four forces “come from.” This is one of the many questions left unanswered and unaddressed.

And here we come full circle. Smith decries the scientific worldview because “it necessarily dead-ends in questions that have no answers.” He claims to solve the problem by providing answers to these questions. But why is it that his answers are preferable to unanswered questions? Why is it more helpful to believe that Infinite Omniscience exploded in the Big Bang and that subatomic particles are therefore sentient than to believe that matter flared forth during the Big Bang and then associated to form atoms, and then molecules, and then life, and then sentience? Why is the concept of the veil explanatory and the concept of emergence nonexplanatory? We are not told.

Let me insert my own perspective here on the role of explanation in theological discourse. I would argue that theological doctrines are not meant to explain. They may *sound* like explanations, but it is not their explanatory power that keeps them alive. If religions try to sell themselves on the strength of their explanations, they will fail again and again—just as religious “explanations” of disease, historical events, and other phenomena have failed in the past. Instead, I see religions as helping us to transform ourselves, to situate ourselves, to orient ourselves. What keeps religions alive is that they satisfy our longing to belong and educate our emotional lives in ways that keep us psychologically and spiritually integrated. To my mind, our scientific understanding of Nature—bottom-up, emergent, contingent—has rich religious potential here.

I am troubled by the publication of this book. Smith is an eminent and revered scholar who has made seminal contributions to our understanding of the world’s religions. He is also a very kind, charismatic person with a deeply held faith that I greatly admire. Had he elected to write a book in which he set out his Big Picture as a contribution to theology, it would be read with interest as a capstone to his distinguished devotion to religious

thought. But that is not going to be the trajectory of this book. The work is going to be greeted with such headlines as “Famous Scholar Derides Scientism and Darwinism!” And scientists who review it and challenge its premises and sources will be dismissed as “circling their wagons to defend their priesthood.” The science-and-religion dialogue, alas, will not be moved forward.

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