

# THE MATTER OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE: RESPONSE TO HUSTON SMITH

by Gregory R. Peterson

*Abstract.* Huston Smith's *Why Religion Matters* is the culminating reflections of one of the most respected religion scholars of our day. In this work, Smith sees modern society to be in the midst of a spiritual crisis. According to Smith, this crisis has been brought about by the advance of science and the inroads into what Smith calls the traditional worldview. While Smith's work is of some importance, I believe that several of its fundamental claims are mistaken. Smith often does not accurately portray the content of science and frequently conflates the actual practice of science with philosophical scientism. Smith wrongly blames science alone for the decline of religion among Western elites. His claim that all religions can be equivocally described in terms of the traditional worldview is also problematic. Despite this, Smith does have a clear conception of what the issues are in the relation between science and religion. It is my hope that these issues will continue to be taken seriously.

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My first encounter with the work of Huston Smith was, perhaps ironically, in a religion-and-science course. In an effort to place the science-and-religion dialogue within a cross-cultural context, two of Smith's works, *Forgotten Truth* (1976) and *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (1982), helped to broaden the science-and-religion dialogue beyond a strictly Western context. Smith's work brought an appreciation for the wisdom of the world's religions while at the same time criticizing the vicissitudes of modernism. Readers of *Why Religion Matters* will find that, at least on this matter, Smith's opinions have changed little in the intervening years. Smith argues that

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we are in the midst of a cultural crisis brought about by the decline of religion in contemporary society, a decline caused primarily by the advent of science and its largely negative cultural influence. This crisis can be healed only by a return to the wisdom of the world's great religions, what Smith calls the traditional worldview.

*Why Religion Matters* allows us to glimpse some beautiful flowers, but there are distressingly many weeds. Smith's account of science and scientism, intellectual history, and even theology are problematic in a number of ways. At the same time, many of Smith's concerns are well founded and should be addressed. One can hope that Smith's frequently polemical style will spur the kind of broader debate and dialogue that needs to take place. It is more likely, however, that Smith's approach will reinforce the negative dialectic between religion and science that is so often at play in our culture today.

#### WRONG MOVES

In many ways, it is hard not to be sympathetic with Smith's agenda. Whatever differences we may have, I can only share Smith's concern for the status of religion in contemporary society. Certainly science and scientism have had a significant impact on the perception of religion, as Smith claims. Smith's primary metaphor of the "tunnel of modernity" that contrasts with the "great outdoors" of the religious life is an apt, poetic expression of the problems that face us. Yet, frequently, Smith leads astray, not only in his construal of the problem but in terms of the answer as well.

*Getting the Science Right.* Science occupies center stage in *Why Religion Matters*. For Smith, science (or at least the scientific philosophies that it has inspired) bears the brunt of the blame for the cultural decline of religion. Smith speaks metaphorically of the tunnel of modernity, a tunnel that has four sides. Each side of the tunnel represents a different mode of modernity's influence. Scientism forms the floor, while the media, the law, and education form the walls and ceiling. The diversity is misleading, however, for science-and-religion conflicts underlie all. When Smith speaks about the media, the law, and higher education, it is the negative impact of science and scientism that is the focus. Scientism, in Smith's mind, is the root cause of our culture's malaise, and only the proper limitation of scientific claims can free religion to carry on its important and traditional task.

Smith's analysis and portrayal of science and scientism, however, are problematic on several levels. The first, and perhaps most important, is the lack of clarity about what counts as science and what counts as scientism. Smith frequently seems to interchange the terms, with the result that science is often blamed for what, properly speaking, is not science but a scientific worldview. Conversely, what often is properly science is portrayed as scientism. This is clearest in Smith's account of natural history and evolutionary theory. Evolutionary theory is rejected not simply be-

cause Smith finds it scientifically dubious but because it is seen to compete and conflict with the traditional (that is, religious) worldview. In essence, Smith treats evolutionary theory as an ideology and rejects it as such. As pointed out by both Ian Barbour and Ursula Goodenough, Smith's critique of evolutionary theory is far from satisfactory, relying as it does on fringe critics such as Philip Johnson and Johnathan Wells. The result is the unmistakable impression that Smith is targeting not simply scientism but science itself.

This frequent conflation is made somewhat understandable by Smith's rather narrow definition of science. According to Smith, "Science is the body of facts about the natural world that controlled experiments require us to believe, together with logical extrapolations from those facts, and the added things that scientific instruments enable us to see with our own eyes" (pp. 191–92). Smith's application of this definition is even narrower than it might sound, for he seems to think that what counts as science should be limited to experimental physics and chemistry. Smith's reasons for this conviction are clearly philosophically motivated. By limiting science and its relevance to that of constructing a worldview, Smith sees himself as making room for religion. Yet he seems little aware of or unconcerned that his definition of science would hardly pass muster even for physics, where the role of hypotheses, the underdetermination of data, and the significance of research programs are well understood by philosophers of science. Furthermore, Smith's delimitation of science is, ultimately, only a papering over of the real problem. Whether or not we call cosmic and evolutionary history "science," the evidence for both is real and needs to be dealt with as such.

Often, Smith's treatment of particular scientific theories and claims is cavalier. In discussing the "meta-sciences" (Smith's term) of particle and astrophysics, for instance, he claims that their distance from everyday life "allows the building blocks of nature—particles, strings, or whatever—to keep changing, and the age of the universe to be halved or doubled every now and then" (p. 15). Although such a statement is perhaps permissible (and entertaining) from a lay perspective, it is a distortion of the science involved. In other places, Smith moves from science to religious metaphor in a way that either misinterprets the science or conflates scientific and religious language. This is most obvious in the several passages that deal with light. Smith uses the science of light, from its quantum characteristics to its relationship to relativity theory, as a means of providing religious insight. But consider the following statement: "Photons are transitional from Spirit to matter, because . . . they are only quasi-material while producing things that are fully material. Scientists would give their eye-teeth to know what the non-material component of photons is. For religionists, it is Spirit" (pp. 265–66).

There are many questions for which physicists might give their eye-teeth to find an answer, but this is not one of them. It is not clear what it

is about the physics of light that enables Smith to conclude that photons are somehow spiritual in character. Is it their masslessness? Or is it the quantum characteristics of nonlocality and fields that leads to this conclusion? One may legitimately draw inspiration from particle physics (as Wolfhart Pannenberg [1993] does in his portrayal of God in terms of spirit/field), but to claim that the “non-material component” of photons *is* Spirit can only strike the scientifically literate as incomprehensible. While these shortcomings have no direct impact on Smith’s thesis, they certainly reduce its credibility, particularly among the scientists and scientifically literate religious thinkers whom he is trying to persuade.

*Is Science to Blame?* Smith’s thesis is larger, however, than a simple argument that science and scientism (however defined) are bad for us. Smith argues that science and scientism have been bad for us from the beginning, that the decline of religion in our society can be traced back to the birth of modern science. Smith seems to assume that Western society has been playing a zero-sum game with religion and science. The more science gains culturally, the more religion loses. To reverse the trend, consequently, one must roll back the influence of science.

As with the case of science and scientism, Smith engages in a conflation when speaking of the historical impact of science. In the earliest chapters Smith addresses not science per se but modernism as the central problem. In chapter 1 Smith contrasts modern, postmodern, and traditional (religious) worldviews. Each of these worldviews, in Smith’s estimation, has something right and something wrong with it. In particular, the traditional worldview, encompassing all of the world’s great religious traditions, provides a metaphysical basis for understanding reality that both modernist and postmodernist worldviews lack. Traditional worldviews provide us with the “big picture.” Modernism, by contrast, has confined us to a tunnel, the primary metaphor of *Why Religion Matters*.

The critique of modernism reappears here and there throughout the book. One sees it in Smith’s discussion of the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx, who are analyzed not so much in terms of their relationship to science as according to their role as important modernist thinkers (pp. 165–73). More commonly, however, Smith equates modernism with science and scientism, with sometimes confusing results. Smith’s analysis of higher education is a case in point. Following the work of George Marsden and others, Smith laments the marginalization of religion in modern higher education. He reserves sharp criticism for modern religious studies departments that treat religion “objectively” and eschew theological approaches that take the truth claims of religious traditions seriously. Smith’s blaming of science for this development (for example, pp. 80–84), however, is surely simplistic, not least because “science” in this sense includes, as the chapter progresses, the social sciences, the humanities, and biblical scholarship.

Smith's monocausal blaming of science for the grand arc of secularization across disciplines represents a missed opportunity. The modern study of history and biblical studies may indeed have been inspired by the model of the natural sciences, but they were inheritors of other cultural influences as well, such as the Enlightenment's collective horror at the excesses of the religious wars of the Reformation. Indeed, physical science in the form of natural theology remained one of the first lines of defense for traditional theism against the broad political and philosophical secularism that was then spreading among European thinkers. Although scientism has indeed been one kind of challenge to traditional religion, it has also frequently been accompanied by historicism and pluralism as challenges to modern theological thinking. While many, including Smith, find the plurality of the world's religions a refreshing and rich source of human reflection, others have thought differently. As the West has become increasingly familiar with the existence of other sophisticated societies, with their own moral codes and conflicting theological claims, one common response has been to treat all claims to revelation as equally dubious.

The marginalization of religion in contemporary society, then, probably has several roots, only one of which can be attributed to science and scientism. Beyond this, it is worth asking how and in what ways religion is declining. There is an obvious sense in which Christianity is no longer as culturally dominant as it once was, particularly in Europe but in the United States as well. This is especially true among the educated elite who occupy positions in colleges and universities and who provide the expert voices of our culture. It is less clear that religion and religiosity as a whole are declining. At least in the United States, religious belief of some form is widely adhered to, even if participation in traditional forms of religion has declined. While mainstream churches have declined, conservative and fundamentalist churches have grown, a growth paralleled by greater interest in Asian religions as well as in many experimental and personal modes of religion, some of which fall under the rubric of "New Age" religion. Smith, of course, is cognizant of these facts, but they seem to be problematic for his thesis that we are in (as the title of his book indicates) an age of disbelief. Smith could well be right, but the signs of a resurgence of religious activity in recent decades might indicate that we are not in a period of decline so much as a period of transition. The problem is precisely that the old wine, or at least the old wineskins, do not satisfy. The need, however, remains and has yet to find fulfillment.

*The Traditional Worldview?* Throughout *Why Religion Matters*, Smith's goal is to champion the traditional worldview and contrast it with the worldviews of modernism and scientism. According to Smith, this traditional worldview is subscribed to by all of the great religious traditions. In it, there is always the presumption of a greater reality beyond the merely observable. There is a distinction between the sacred and the profane,

between the natural and the supernatural. The supernatural or transcendent quality of reality, in turn, provides the basis of value and meaning in the world. According to Smith, this traditional worldview places humankind at the center, with the consequence that our species has a kind of metaphysical importance attached to it. In this worldview spiritual matters take precedence over material ones. We are finite beings seeking the infinite. What appears chaotic is, in truth, but part of a deeper, sublime order.

The claim that all religions share these basic characteristics and, therefore, in some sense aim at the same thing is important to Smith's general argument. Smith is no conservative Christian, despite his antievolutionary stance and alliance with conservatives on this particular issue. That all societies subscribe to this kind of worldview Smith cites as evidence for his claim that it is "transparently intelligible," whereas the scientific worldview is not (p. 233). That it occurs across cultures and has been developed over thousands of years suggests, claims Smith, its basic rightness.

It is difficult to resist Smith's rendering of the traditional worldview, and he is clearly at his best when writing about religion. Smith speaks eloquently of the irreducible "more" quality of human experience, and hits home when he claims "that the finitude of mundane existence cannot satisfy the human heart completely" (p. 3). Smith is surely correct in resisting the trend of recent decades to emphasize differences between religious traditions to the point where observations of similarities become impossible.

Yet there are good reasons to resist the claim that all religions have the same aim, at least in the straightforward way that Smith's exposition implies, and the claim that the world's great religious traditions share "the traditional worldview" becomes problematic upon closer analysis. Some of these problems become clear in a chart that Smith provides that details the parallels in both worldviews and religious anthropology (p. 224). Although some of these comparisons work, others do not, a fact made most obvious by Smith's synthesizing the different Chinese religions into a unified "Chinese Religious Complex," which ignores not only the distinctions between traditions but also the complex development of these traditions over time. The observation that the Chinese have been culturally syncretistic in their religious affiliations (being simultaneously Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist) does not wholly alleviate the problem, because religious practice exists also in the religions' pure forms. That is, there have been exclusivist Taoist and Confucian traditions as well. Similarly, Smith can claim that religious anthropologies are the same only by ignoring the vast differences between (for instance) Christian accounts of the soul and Hindu accounts of the five bodies. Smith avoids charting out soteriologies, which would be even more problematic.

Certainly these differences may seem minute when compared to modernist worldviews and anthropologies, but potentially they loom large for the particular kinds of arguments that Smith makes. It is not clear at all

why Buddhists and Hindus, for instance, would sympathize with Smith's antievolutionary polemic. Neither of these traditions posits an inherent sense of meaning or progress in the phenomenal world. For Buddhists the phenomenal world is characterized by the principle of dependent arising, a principle that is untroubled by and even coherent with neo-Darwinian accounts of evolution. While the variety of religious traditions may share common kinds of concerns about the status of science and with specific scientific theories, there is considerable diversity as well. What troubles one tradition may fit quite well with another.

In the process of championing a traditional worldview, Smith also distances himself from current attempts at dialogue or integration, most specifically the activities of *Zygon* and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences (CTNS). In each case, Smith sees those who participate in these organizations and modes of thought as selling out and giving up all that is most important about religion in an attempt to pacify its critics. Once again, Smith paints with a broad and sometimes distorting brush. Strangely enough, Smith uses opposition to evolutionary theory as a litmus test for how genuinely religiously oriented these organizations are. Smith criticizes both organizations for not considering intelligent design, yet the anthropic principle, a current focus of design arguments, has been the subject of repeated debate and consideration. Smith even misunderstands the standard criticism of the God of the Gaps, which is not a criticism of miracles per se but of using God as a *deus ex machina* to prop up scientific or pseudoscientific theories (pp. 75–76).

More important, it is unclear why Smith should be so wholly opposed to attempts by theologians to engage in dialogue with the sciences. Smith's construction of "the traditional worldview" papers over the dynamic element of religious traditions in their never-ending quest to enunciate timeless truths in an ever-changing world. In this light, organizations such as CTNS and journals such as *Zygon* follow in the footsteps of thinkers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, each of whom interpreted the Christian faith in terms of the philosophical vocabulary of his day. Presumably, for Smith the difference lies in the inherently corrosive effect that science has had on religion, but such a charge once again conflates science and scientism. Indeed, Smith's efforts to distinguish between science and scientism and to justify the integrity of religious traditions in the face of modern science have been best carried out by scholars associated with the very organizations he criticizes.

#### RIGHT MOTIVES

Despite our significant differences in the areas of science, history, and religion, I find that Smith at least correctly identifies the issues. In this, *Why Religion Matters* does achieve some importance, and the title itself could well serve as the basis of reflection as the new millennium proceeds. Why,

indeed, does religion matter, and how should the importance of religious traditions be communicated in the years ahead?

The decline of traditional religion, at least in terms of its impact and significance for high culture and intellectual activity over the past two centuries, is self-evident. While there are multiple causes for this decline, science, and what might be called the mythos of science, has certainly been a contributing cause. Indeed, the mythos of science—the catapulting of science into a naturalist philosophy and the use of the label of science to justify secular ideologies—has frequently loomed far larger than the science itself. It is of no small significance that Marx and Freud portrayed themselves as scientists and justified their distinctive critiques of religion in such terms. Combating this mythos, this scientism, in both its academic and populist forms remains one very important reason for maintaining an ongoing science-and-religion dialogue.

I agree with Smith that the law, the media, and higher education remain important and contentious fields for science-and-religion issues, and he is correct that more attention needs to be directed towards these areas. Much more, in fact, could and needs to be said about these issues. While Smith focuses on how the news media present sciences and religion, it is worth pointing out that many of the images of religion and science that we receive today come not from the news but from the vehicles of popular culture: movies, television, mass-market novels, and the like. I would suggest that the impact that these venues have for forming attitudes about both religion and science are often underappreciated and deserve more attention.

The question is, How does one go about addressing these concerns? Smith clearly portrays the relationship of science and religion as a zero-sum conflict. In his view the purview and authority of science must be limited in order to make room for religion. I would suggest, however, that a better model for thinking about science and religion is that of a nonzero sum game, with the potential for both fields to come out better and, indeed, richer from the engagement. Such an approach means abandoning the view that there is such a thing as *the* traditional worldview and, rather, thinking dynamically about the meanings of religious truths and symbols in relation to their past and current historical contexts. In this process, much may stay the same. The physical sciences will never be able to provide us with a picture of the transcendent. But much will change as well, and many of these changes are likely to be for the better.

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