

# Huston Smith, Pilgrim of the Perennial Philosophy

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

“[I]t is this wisdom-offering—none other than the Perennial Philosophy—that can become truly ‘saving’ for our times, provided we have the courage to listen, learn, and truly live its teachings.”<sup>1</sup>

*Huston Smith*

**H**uston Smith (1919-2016) was one of the twentieth century’s most internationally renowned and revered doyens of the world’s religions. He was the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, Syracuse University. Smith had a remarkable gift for building bridges between the East and West—reflected in the diverse peoples of the world and their faith traditions—and for interconnecting the various disciplines, especially with his pioneering focus on the role of science in the contemporary world. Smith not only explored the theoretical tenets of the world’s religions, but was himself a pilgrim of the sacred, of the perennial philosophy, and he provided others with a map illustrating the topography of each of the religions as their own practitioners would approach them. His entire life was an expression of his wayfaring across cultures and religious and spiritual forms. In the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The whole life of Huston Smith may be said to have been devoted to the search for the Truth in the many forms in which It has manifested Itself in our world.”<sup>2</sup> Smith himself writes,

<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith, “Foreword,” to *The Essential Sophia*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Katherine O’Brien (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2006), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Homage to Huston Smith on His Eightieth Birthday,” *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Summer 1999), p. 5.

To say it as clearly as I can: There is a Way that things fundamentally and unchangingly (metaphysically) are. Human collectivities have never been without a grasp of that Way. The perennial philosophy is the articulation of that grasp. As such, it is everywhere to be found...<sup>3</sup>

I find myself wanting to say that the Tradition comes close to being our only philosophical possession that is worth defending... I am thinking of a Tradition that is perennial, not modern, and primordial in being not distinctively Western. It is the Tradition, often referred to as the Perennial Philosophy...<sup>4</sup>

Many individuals were not only introduced to the study of the world's religions through Huston Smith, but many were also introduced to the perennial philosophy and the perennialist or traditionalist writings of authors such as René Guénon (1886-1951), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) and Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984), as well as of gifted sages and teachers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933), Martin Lings (1909-2005), Joseph Epes Brown (1920-2000), Marco Pallis (1895-1989), Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005), William Stoddart (b. 1925).

Smith was one of the founders, and the vice-president, of the Foundation for Traditional Studies, which published *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*.<sup>5</sup> Smith's tireless support for the perennial philosophy as a remedy for the spiritual malaise of the contemporary world was extraordinary: "From the 60's Smith became the best known expositor in academic circles in America of the perennial philosophy or what he preferred to call 'the primordial tradition' and he carried out a tireless crusade to make this perspective better known in both philosophical and religious circles."<sup>6</sup> He self-identified as a perennialist,

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<sup>3</sup> Huston Smith, "Before Silence Descends: A Concluding Apologia," in David Ray Griffin and Huston Smith, *Primordial Truth and Postmodern Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> Huston Smith, "Two Traditions—and Philosophy," in *Religion of the Heart: Essays Presented to Frithjof Schuon on His Eightieth Birthday*, eds. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and William Stoddart (Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991), p. 278.

<sup>5</sup> Along with the journal *Sophia*, it is also worth noting Smith's support for another perennialist journal, *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, which is affixed to the back cover of each issue: "However deluged I am with incoming, time-consuming mail, I always find myself smiling and turning mental cartwheels when I find an issue of Sacred Web arriving. Its modest circulation belies the quality of every issue's content."

<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Homage to Huston Smith on His Eightieth Birthday," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Summer 1999), p. 7.

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