

Tributes to Huston Smith

Remembering Huston Smith

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

With the death of Huston Smith the world has lost one of its foremost interpreters of the world's religious traditions from East to West. I first met this noble scholar in 1962 when I was at Harvard as a visiting professor at the Center for the Study of World Religions and was asked by my friend, Professor W. Cantwell Smith, the famous Canadian scholar of comparative religion, to accept an invitation from a friend of his from M.I.T., also called Smith, to give a lecture on Islamic thought to his class. Since like Harvard, M.I.T. was my own alma mater, I accepted the invitation and met Huston Smith there. We became friends and met often rapidly. I spent much time with him in Tehran where he had stopped with a number of students of religion who were being taken around the world by himself and another dear friend of mine, Professor Victor Danner. I also met Huston Smith in Malaysia after the Tiananmen Square uprising in Beijing where he had been present, in Europe, in South America, and in practically every continent of the world. I found him to be during every encounter a keen observer of all that involved religion and spirituality.

Although he was the author of the most widely read book in English on the history and teachings of world religions, he was primarily a philosopher and mystic in the traditional sense. He had met Aldous Huxley and had read the latter's book on perennial philosophy but it was not until after we met, that he became aware of traditional perennial philosophy and the works of traditionalists which for him was like fish finding water. It was after this discovery and intellectual rebirth that he

wrote his *Forgotten Truth* and became himself an important voice for the expression of the truths of Tradition. There were two domains in the intellectual universe of Huston Smith during the last half century of his life in which I played a humble role: the discovery of Tradition in the Guénonian and Schuonian sense, and the full discovery of Islam.

Now that he has left this earthly plane, it is time for me to write about a seminal event in his life. When he and Professor Victor Danner were in Tehran, I arranged for them and some of their students to visit a traditional Sufi center or *khānaqāh*. We went to downtown Tehran to the Ni'matullāhī *khānaqāh* where the master of the Order, Dr. Javād Nūrbakhsh, had invited us to lunch. After lunch, in order to reach our cars we had to cross a wide avenue with two lanes of traffic in each direction. With the chaotic traffic of Tehran he was afraid to cross the avenue. So, I held his hand and with much difficulty reached the middle of the avenue with cars zooming in one direction behind us and in the other direction ahead of us. In this precarious position while still holding my hand he turned to me with his ever-present smile and said, "I want to become a Muslim." I answered him jokingly, "Wait until we get to the other side of the avenue." Soon thereafter I did have him take the *shabādah* and later sent him to Lausanne where he met Shaykh 'Īsā Nūr al-Dīn (Frithjof Schuon) and was initiated by him into the Shādhiliyyah Order with the Muslim name Jalāl al-Dīn that I had given him. For the rest of his life he never missed his canonical prayers (*ṣalāh*) and invocation (*dhikr*). Shortly before his death, his wife called me one evening and said that Huston was dying and asked me to say the appropriate prayer for the dying for him which I did over the phone (*raḥimahu'llāh*).

There is a very important point that needs to be mentioned about Huston Smith in order to avoid any confusion concerning Tradition and his attachment to it. As readers of *Sacred Web* know, Traditionalists like myself are opposed to the mixing of sacred forms on the level of the practice of sacred rites while we emphasize the universality of metaphysical doctrines present in different traditional religious universes. But in the exceptional world in which we live, there can be providential exceptions to the rule in order to bring out the inner unity of the reality of different traditions while respecting the sacred forms of each one. A prime example is Ramakrishna, the great Hindu saint and sage of the

19th century. During a certain period of his life he practiced Islam, and in another period Christianity, and demonstrated not only intellectually but also experientially that “all paths lead to the same summit.” On a scholarly level Huston Smith had a similar vocation. Born into a Christian missionary family and brought up in China, in a sense he experienced more than one religion in his sensitive young age. Then, as a scholar of religion deeply attracted to Oriental religions, he practiced *zazen* in Japan, and Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism in the Indian Subcontinent at different periods of his life, became a practicing Muslim to the end of his days, and went to Protestant services on Sundays for the sake of the Christian community around him. But he would have been the first person to confirm the truth that although “all paths lead to the same summit” to reach the summit one must choose and climb on a single path to the top.

Huston Smith is no longer with us physically, but his spirit and memory will continue to live in the hearts and minds of these who were privileged to be his friends or students, and his works will continue to illuminate the fields of religious studies for a long time to come. May God shower His choicest blessing upon him!

“Oh soul in peaceful certitude. Return unto thy Lord, satisfied and satisfying.”

(*Quran*).



Huston Smith and Evolution

A Note in honor of Huston Smith by William Stoddart

In my book *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, published in 2008, I provided a list of six reasons demonstrating why “evolution” (the transformation of species) never took place. That I could venture to say this is hardly surprising, given that there is *absolutely no proof* for evolution! I challenge any evolutionist to produce one.

Be that as it may, in a review of my book, Huston Smith said: “The book’s crowning glory is the chapter entitled ‘Six Fundamental Flaws in the Evolutionist Hypothesis’. If the intellectuals of our world would

read this chapter thoughtfully, attentively, and open-mindedly, our entire outlook on life and the world would be set straight.”

Huston Smith felt so strongly about this, that he proposed that he and I should write a joint letter to the *New York Times*, explaining succinctly why evolution could not have taken place. For a variety of contingent reasons, this unfortunately never took place.

Huston Smith became well known to the public and academics alike, and all parties were avid believers in evolution. He was influenced by the fact that his scientific colleagues, in his own and other university departments, opposed his views.

In the face of these apparently qualified critics, Huston, already a nonagenarian, began to waver. These “authorities”, if not “Job’s comforters”, were certainly “Job’s tempters”.

Huston shared his doubts and hesitations with me, and, after a long series of exchanges between us, he published a strongly-worded denunciation of evolution on pp. 7-8 of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s journal, *Sophia*, in Volume 16, Number 1, 2010. It is reproduced below:

‘Changing the Shibboleth of Evolution

By Huston Smith

It is reported that in one of his battles when Napoleon was hard-pressed, his generals heard him say, “My center is not holding, my flanks are in disarray: I shall attack!”

That remark comes to mind as I prepare to attack the shibboleth of evolution, for the forces are loaded against me in so much the same way as Napoleon’s were. Nevertheless, like him I shall attack.

Evolution has slipped into the contemporary argot on the coattails of *progress*—forever onwards and upwards. We are not as crude as Émile Coué with his “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better,” but the drift is the same, and I am prepared to attack. I have the courage to do that because I have an ally on my side, and he is a staunch one.

In his book, *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, William Stoddart cites six fundamental flaws in the hypothesis of evolution, which six I will here reduce to four.

1. Logical—the greater cannot come from the lesser. The acorn gives

rise to the oak tree because it already is the oak tree in embryo.

2. Biological—the stability of the species. There is no evidence that one species has changed into another. Human mothers never give rise to any but their own kind. (The qualifier human is needed to account for mules.) Intraspecies variations occur, but that's all.
3. Statistical—not enough time. Evolution assumes that life on this planet appeared spontaneously. But the simplest living cell is so complex that prospect that it emerged by chance cannot be expressed in meaningful figures.
4. Teleological—the argument from design. Blind, deaf, and dumb evolution could not have produced the eye, the ear, and the voice.

As for the fossil record, geology and paleontology provide the strongest proofs that evolution never took place. The gaps between the fossils of different geological strata are immense. Darwin was aware of this, and knew that it was the weak spot in his theory. As a result he himself coined the term “missing link”. He was convinced that in time these missing links would be discovered, but despite 150 years of intensive research, not a single missing link has ever been found.’

Below is a facsimile of Huston’s touching last letter to me, dated 28 January 2011. The handwriting on the letter is by Huston himself.



Huston Smith’s books were translated into many foreign languages. His best known book *The World’s Religions* sold more than 2 million copies. His loss will be sorely felt by the thousands, nay millions, of people whom he helped during his long life. Firstly, there were hosts of

visitors to his home (friends, journalists, interviewers, film-makers, etc.), and secondly, there were those, who, precisely, read his many books.

It is with sorrow, but also with thanksgiving, that we take our leave of our learned and compassionate friend.



Huston Smith, Bridge-BUILDER

By Harry Oldmeadow

[This is a shortened and revised version of an article published in *Sophia: the Journal of Traditional Studies*, 10:1, 2010, 73-80.]

If William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) were two of the most widely read books on religion in the century's first half, Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* is surely the most popular of the second. First published in 1958 it has been in print ever since, selling millions of copies and now re-titled *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. The hallmarks of Smith's approach to the comparative study of the world's religions were evident from the outset: the conviction that each religion was the custodian of timeless truths and values; the attempt to understand the forms and practices of any particular tradition from the viewpoint of its adherents; an intuitive sympathy which enabled Smith to tune in to a wide diversity of religious modalities; an understanding that the hyper-rationalism of much modern philosophy and the pseudo-scientific methodologies of the so-called social sciences were inadequate tools with which to grasp spiritual realities; a fresh and accessible style of exposition free of the numbing academic jargon. He evinced a natural courtesy and respect for the traditions he was exploring. Clearly, the study of religion was no mere academic exercise but one of deep engagement. Smith would likely agree with the claim of another inter-religious bridge-builder, Fr Bede Griffiths, that, "The rediscovery of religion is the great intellectual, moral and spiritual adventure of our time" (*The Golden String*, 1964, 13-14).

Huston Smith's understanding of both the inner unity and the formal diversity of the world's integral religious traditions was deepened and

sharpened after Seyyed Hossein Nasr introduced him to the perennialist perspective exemplified in the writings of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. As was clear from the 1991 revisions to *The Religions of Man*, Smith's horizons also broadened to encompass the primordial traditions of peoples such as the Native Americans. Within the academic world Smith was an energetic and eloquent spokesman for the traditionalist school, and engaged many of the deepest problems and issues arising out of the contemporary collision of the forces of tradition and modernity. His essential vocation was as an educator or, to use his own term, a "religious communicator". As the editor of a *festschrift* in his honour remarked, "Professor Smith's teaching career has been devoted to bridging intellectual gulfs: between East and West, between science and the humanities, and between the formal education of the classroom and informal education via films and television" (Arvind Sharma in *Fragments of Infinity*, 1991, xi-xii).

From Smith's wide-ranging scholarly *oeuvre* we may select three works of signal importance: *The Religions of Man*, his masterly conspectus of the world's major religious traditions; *Forgotten Truth: the Primordial Tradition* (1977) in which he expounds the perennial wisdom which lies at the heart of manifold sapiential doctrines and religious forms; and *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (1982) which elaborates a critique of the prevailing contemporary worldview, particularly as it finds expression in the Western academic ethos and in the highly reductive disciplinary specializations which purport to "explain" religious phenomena.

Whilst the Judeo-Christian tradition in which he was raised provided Smith with a firm spiritual anchorage, his life and work alike testify to his willingness to immerse himself in the forms and practices of other traditions, not by way of any kind of syncretism or in pursuit of a chimerical "universal" religion, but in the search for understanding and for "the light that is of neither East nor West". Religious experience has been a watchword in his writings. Huston Smith was a sympathetic, and no doubt exemplary, guest in many Houses of the Spirit. As well as moving freely through the corridors of academia (where, it must be said, his ideas inevitably encountered some suspicion and skepticism as well as acclaim) he met countless rabbis, clerics, swamis, Zen masters, lamas, mystics and the like; by all reports such meetings were marked by the spontaneous and mutual recognition of the radiant spiritual maturity

which graces those who have traveled a goodly distance on the path.

Huston Smith displayed a gift for articulating profound truths in the most simple and accessible language. Here is an example from his autobiography, one which intimates the mystery which, he tells us, can hardly be fathomed in a lifetime. Referring to the cross as “the metaphor I use for understanding human existence”, Smith writes: “Our life in historical or chronological time, measuring and minding, cautious and comparing, forms the horizontal arm of the cross. Our experience of the unqualified, of inner, immeasurable time (or timelessness), is the cross’s vertical pole. We live in two kinds of time or perspective simultaneously. The horizontal and the vertical are at once quite distinct and entirely overlapping, and to experience their incongruity and confluence is what it means to be human” (*Tales of Wonder*, 2009, 41).

Huston Smith: scholar, minister, teacher, culture critic, pilgrim, doyen of comparative religionists, bridge-builder; in each of these roles he has served the cause of inter-religious understanding with great distinction and, in the words of one of his students, with “honesty of person, penetrating sensitivity, but above all, his flowing kindness” (Marilyn Gustin in *Fragments of Infinity*, 13).



Huston Smith, Bon Voyage!

By Charles Upton

Huston Smith was (as he often said) a kind of tour guide to the Great Religions and the Great Ideas that were getting transmitted to the masses in the 20th century—mostly, say, from the 50’s through the 90’s. He was like an anthropologist who not only studied his tribes but joined them, often for years, so he could periodically come back to “civilization” and regale the rest of us with his adventures and discoveries.

You can’t do that anymore. The tribes are no longer isolated and pure—all the tribespeople wear t-shirts and baseball caps and carry smart phone; and there’s no longer any such a thing as “civilization” to come back to either. Many of the seekers who followed his career and read his books are getting on in years; young seekers are fewer and farther between. Yet those who haven’t already been swept away

in the flood of terror and chaos that have so far characterized the 21st century are all-in-all more serious, more ready to cross swords with the Enemy, in this time when—in the words of Seraphim Rose—“Satan has walked naked into human history.”

Huston was truly a gentleman and a scholar, a radiant, generous, and smiling soul. Certainly the religious liberalism, or liberality, of his time involved him (as they did me) with some things that were maybe never a very good idea, and which have become a lot darker and more dangerous than they were when he first started out: psychedelics; channeled “entities”; atheism as a “religion”. Yet he survived them all, triumphed over them, then turned to share his triumph with all who could receive it. He wanted everybody to get some inkling of the Higher Things, by hook or by crook; consequently he was perhaps more indiscriminate in his experience and teaching than he would have been if he had been born 20 or 40 or 60 years later. As it was he spanned the whole field from post-WWII pop intellectual culture through the psychedelic era, and the post-psychedelic New Age era, and what was for some of us the “Traditionalist/Perennialist” era, to the present era-less era of shock, loss and dissolution. In these times we can’t throw as wide a net as Huston did; we need either to find the place make to our final stand against the encroaching darkness, or else simply disappear into the infinite background of things.

As he goes, he takes a big time with him. What he gave us we can still carry, hidden for safekeeping in some secret chamber of the heart, but we can’t do it with the same glad, expansive and fearless style as he did. Yet his wisdom and his bounty, reduced to their ash and their essence, still make good survival rations, concentrated nourishment for the journey ahead, in both this world and the next.