

I: The Christian Worldview

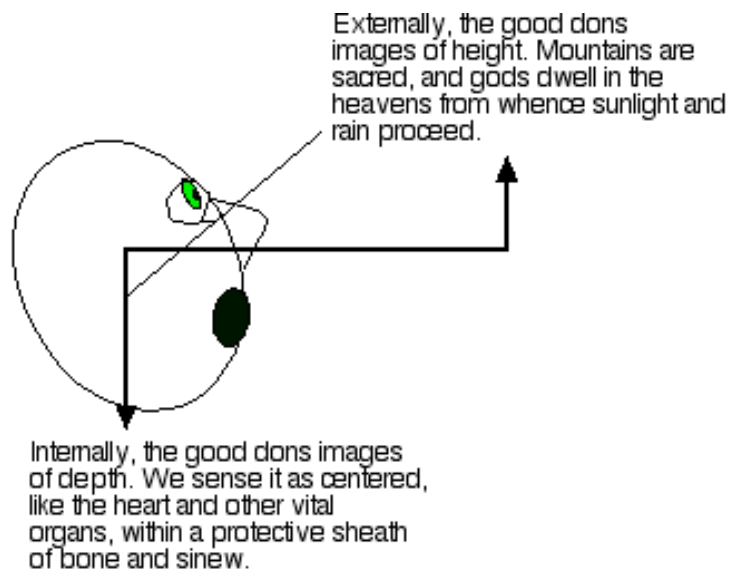
Huston Smith's word of warning to the reader (that he places at the *end* of the chapter): This chapter outlines the universal grammar of religion to which (in their various idioms) all religions conform. This chapter may seem dense (especially if you're not one who likes philosophy), but take heart! In the next chapter Smith fills in the framework he creates in this chapter with the story of Christianity, providing concrete details and examples to flesh out this abstract framework.

Two-tiered world of Christianity: the "upper story" (transcendence, infinity) and the "lower story" (Earth, physical world, what is known, finiteness). Christian world is objective, not an invention of human imagination.

Fixed Points of the Christian World

1. *The Christian world is Infinite.* The Infinite has doorways, but not doors. Can't compartmentalize God's domain/presence to just one part of our world, just one part of our lives.
2. *The Infinite includes the finite.* "In Him we live and move and have our being". God's pervasiveness needs to be experienced, not just intellectually affirmed. Heart and soul experience along with head knowledge. God's majesty must include, not exclude, meekness. Attitude of gratefulness and awe for all of the wonder and gifts around us from God.
3. *The contents of the finite world are hierarchically ordered.* "Great Chain of Being" sees the universe composed of an infinite number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existence through every possible grade up to the boundless Infinite: mineral → vegetable → animal → rational human → angels → God.
4. *Causation is from the top down, from the Infinite down through the descending degrees of reality.* Science has relied on reductionism (reducing all phenomena to physical forces interacting with matter at the sub-atomic level); it is founded on our physical senses. An explanation of *why* complexity increases is causing scientists to re-examine the assumption that matter is the fundamental stuff of the universe. Information appears to be the fundamental thing. Scientists become inquirers who remain open to the possibility that nature has deeper levels of information to divulge. The whole *is* greater than the sum of its parts. This is what the Christian worldview asserts in its top-down causation.
5. *In descending to finitude, the singularity of the Infinite splays into multiplicity—* the One becomes the many. Foundational virtue is existence. The virtues of good, the true, and the beautiful open out into the virtues of creativity, compassion, and love. All this is from God, the One.
6. *As the virtues ascend the causal ladder, they expand. As they expand, they begin to overlap; their distinctions fade and they begin to merge.* Pyramid image with God at the top who knows lovingly and loves knowingly. A "simplicity" that includes everything; a profound paradox. Our language + culture cannot encapsulate God. We all have different words for God and ways of worshipping and experiencing God but it is all from the same God and for the same God.

7. *When power and goodness (and other virtues) converge at the top of the pyramid, absolute perfection reigns.* How deal with problem of evil? God endows us with intelligence and freedom. Free to make mistakes. "Original sin" is a description of the human condition—our sense of individuality as persons will naturally lead us to act in ways that set us apart from others; to make mistakes; errors of commission and omission whether conscious or sub-conscious. We humans are mixed bags: capable of great nobility and horrendous evil. We cannot get rid of our egotism and self-centeredness that is built into us (that's what "original sin" is) but we must work on restraining it. All of the self-help books out there won't solve the problem of our humanness because they assume we're sufficient unto ourselves—no need of a transcendent reality. The story of Adam and Eve is the story of each of us and what happens to us as we mature into adulthood (see also Marcus Borg's *Heart of Christianity*, chapter 6 section "Born Again: Why We Need This").
8. *Everything that is outside us is also inside us:* "The kingdom of God is within you." Within us the best lies deepest inside us: it is basic, fundamental, the ground of our being. That which outside ourselves we seek in the highest heavens, inwardly we seek in the depths of our souls. We long for God. Symbolism of space:



We inhabit multiple worlds. Infinite, holy God descending through the personable imminent God on down to angels on down to the physical universe. Soul → mind → body.

9. *We cannot know the Infinite.* If we are to know it confidently, the Infinite must take the initiative and show itself to us. We cannot grasp it through our own efforts alone.
10. *Revelation is multiple in both scope and degree;* it has both horizontal breadth and vertical depth. **Breadth:** civilizations differ, the better to flesh out the full scope of human potential which no single civilization can circumscribe. All

revelations are paths to salvation. The single Revelation expresses itself in different lowercase revelations, all of which contain truth sufficient unto salvation. Revelations are for the civilizations they create, and within each the truths revealed *are* absolute and can brook no rivals.

When a man says that his wife means the world to him, he is not claiming that she should mean the world to other men. Underlying the "relative absolute" in his assertion, there is an absolute Absolute: he *does* believe that all men should feel for their wives the *love* that he feels for his wife. There is a new mood in Christendom, a more conscious, general recognition that though for Christians God is *defined by* Jesus, he is not *confined to* Jesus. This is how we should view Jesus' statement that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14.6). For Christians this is true but we can recognize that this will not be true for those of another religious faith (see also Marcus Borg's *Heart of Christianity*, chapter 11 section "Why Be Christian?").

Joseph Campbell gave the analogy of true religions being like different word-processing software. Each brand of word-processing software is used for creating documents that are in a particular computer format. Users of a given brand of word-processing software cannot use the documents written in the format of another brand of word-processing software. Most users of a given brand of software get to know most of the specific commands and keystrokes of that brand of software and should stick with that particular brand of software. They'll have great difficulty in getting to know the other brands of software. For most people it is best to stick with one brand of word-processing software as long as you acknowledge that the other brands of word-processing software *are* word-processing software and can create documents too of equal value to yours.

Depth: paradigmatic instances in which God burst into human consciousness with a force that creates civilizations.

- a. *Moses on Mount Sinai*
- b. *Jesus emerges from the Jordan after his baptism and the Spirit of God descends upon him*
- c. *Saul knocked off his horse and struck blind on the road to Damascus.*

Theophanies of this magnitude endow their recipients with a charisma that rubs off onto their disciples.

11. *Reports have to be interpreted—hence the science of exegesis* (the process or method of interpreting scripture). Four steps:
 - a. *Literal:* What does the text explicitly assert?
 - b. *Ethical:* What does the text tell us we should and should not do?
 - c. *Allegorical:* What are the meanings that Jesus' parables, for example, convey?
 - d. *Anagogic:* What inspiration can we draw from the text? Secular culture equates "myth" with superstition but myth is "truer than history" because it refers to Transcendence which cannot be accurately described in human

language. "Follow your bliss" of Joseph Campbell should actually be "Follow your aspiration or inspiration" because it always points us upward (whereas some forms of bliss are found in not so noble ways). To breathe is to inhale spirit (Holy Spirit) and to aspire is to ride spirit to higher realms.

12. *Exegesis that stops with the literal meaning of the text*—the lowest of the four steps on the ladder—*cannot do that text full justice*. Jesus spoke to his disciples in parables because it was taken for granted that literalism could not do the full job. Paul, Origen, and St. Augustine (and others in Classical Christianity) all thought that an exegesis truncated at the lowest level is a bit too simple-minded. The sea change from the traditional to the scientific worldview has profoundly affected the way our language works. Previous meanings of the scripture reached higher up the ladder. Modern culture now says that the only truth is the literal-factual truth. If we stick to the Bible's literal assertions, we find ourselves in a tangle of contradictions analogous to those that scientists encounter when they try to draw verbal pictures of their subjects (especially of the quantum and astronomical worlds or domains). (See also Marcus Borg's *Heart of Christianity*, chapter 3 section "The Truth of Metaphor")

As long as we remain on the human plane, the only way of dealing with the paradoxes in the Bible is to reach out and embrace both extremes of the contradictions. Paradoxes are *seeming* contradictions that can be resolved in a multi-leveled view of things. Example: if we see a locomotive going away and some time later returning to us on the same tracks, but facing now in the opposite direction, the matter (if left there) would be illogical. But if we were to climb a hill and see that around the bend there was a turnstile, there would be no problem. Theologically, the situation is the same: only from a higher plane of reality can the paradoxes of our daily life be resolved.

Science's technical language is mathematics. Religion's technical language that we must use in order to access the higher plane is symbolism—sacred art (music, paintings such as icons, poetry, myths, metaphors, parables, figures of speech, and stories). It is not possible to read scripture seriously if we stay within the stifling confines of literalism.

13. *There are distinct and complementary ways of knowing, rational and intuitive*. "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is its faithful servant" (Einstein). The true function of reason is to attain the truth or supreme good (Pascal). Intellect is not reason. We can use our minds to be like a computer or encyclopedia or we can use it to try to make sense of our world and the meaning of it all—use the information to transform our lives and the lives of others. In human thought, reason and intuition must work together.
14. *Religions have outsides and insides (outer, exoteric forms that house inner, esoteric cores)*.
 - a. Esoterics: God is in focal view; celestial world is concrete and physical world is abstract. Exoterics: God's created world is focal and God must be inferred from it; physical world is concrete and celestial world is abstract.
 - b. From 6th point above, for esoterics, only God at the top of the pyramid of virtues is completely real; occupies no space => formless. Exoterics

- require forms (diagrams, words, propositions); e.g., someone like C.S. Lewis.
- c. Exoterics need to think of God in personal terms. Esoterics complement their "personal" God with formless, unlimited God. Absolute imminence and absolute transcendence in absolute tension is what enables us to be open to and respond to the divine.
 - d. Esoterics can understand exoterics and they recognize the need for exoterics, but the reverse does not hold. Everywhere in history exoterics far outnumber esoterics, and religious institutions run mostly on the energy they provide. Both are needed: kernels and shells make a whole.
15. *Outside of Revelation's beam, we live in darkness.* God knows the way things are, but we grope our way. At times we get a glimmer of what it's all about but our reason remains in darkness. In relation to God we are less than a protein in a single cell on a human finger.

We are born in mystery, we live in mystery, and we die in mystery, but it is not a mystery that bogs down in befuddlement. Religious mystery invites; it glows, lures, and excites, impelling us to enter its dazzling darkness ever more deeply. We stand dumbfounded in the presence of God.

Summary

Christian worldview is the worldview of all authentic, *revealed*, religions.

The world is objectively there and intelligible. It is Infinite and includes the finite with its value-laden degrees, hierarchically ordered. As virtues ascend in the hierarchy, they meld into one another until their differences disappear in the Simple One. Evil features in finitude but not in the Absolute, and because the Absolute is all-powerful, in the end absolute perfection reigns. Human beings intersect the degrees of reality, but in them they appear inverted, as if seen on the surface of a glassy lake. We cannot comprehend the fullness of Reality on our own, but its outlines are revealed to us. The key to unlocking the truths of Revelation is symbolism. Knowing is both rational and intuitive, both concrete and abstract. After we have done our best to understand the world, it remains mysterious, but through the shrouds of mystery, we can dimly discern that it is perfect.

The world is perfect, and the human opportunity is to see that and conform to that fact.

Two closing points

1) Christianity began with the controversy over whether Jesus was or was not the Messiah, but Christians honor their heritage. While a Christian can feel honored to be called an "honorary Jew", Christians believe that their break with Judaism was justified—providential, in fact.

Judaism is a religion ethnically grounded in lineage, language, and history; not for other people. Jews accept converts but do not seek them. With Christianity, it is as if God thought: *The achievement of the Jews is too important to be kept to themselves. It needs to break out of its shell and be made available to the world at large. I will see to it that*

that is done. Christian split with Judaism exactly parallels Buddhism's split with Hinduism. Buddhism and Christianity are world religions, while Hinduism and Judaism are ethnic religions.

2) Christianity entered history through God's revelation in Christ, but it does not end there. It moves on, through the New Testament, the church fathers, great theologians and saints; and, in fact, it is unending. This book will deal, however, with just the first millennium of the Christian story, the "classical Christianity", when the creeds were set in place and Christianity was institutionally united. This is the "Christian Torah". Later revelations are the "Christian midrashim" (commentaries that interpret the Torah).

Questions

1. What does Smith's statement that the "Infinite has doorways but not doors" mean to you?
2. How would you describe Smith's "Great Chain of Being"?
3. What does he mean that "causation is top-down"? What difference does it make to view what we experience as being caused from the top-down instead of ultimately just the interaction of atoms or genes trying to reproduce?
4. If God is the source of all that is, how do you understand where evil comes from?
5. What does Smith mean by "original sin" and the story of Adam and Eve? How is that different than what is usually meant by "original sin"? Is he correct? Is his explanation of "original sin" helpful?
6. What does Smith's statement that "Within us the best lies deepest inside us: it is basic, fundamental, the ground of our being" mean to you?
7. In Smith's 8th "rib", he says we inhabit multiple worlds. What are they?
8. What does Jesus' statement that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father except through him mean to you? How can we view that in a non-exclusivist way (i.e., there can be a holy Muslim and a holy Buddhist—they are not damned for being non-Christian)?
9. Should we view Jesus' statement in a non-exclusivist way? Why?
10. What are the four steps of exegesis (the interpretation of scripture)?
11. How can a scripture passage not be literal-factually true but still be true? How can a metaphor be more true than a literal truth? What examples can you come up with?
12. Smith writes about treating the Bible seriously but not literally. What does he mean?
13. How does reason and intuition work together in your own life?
14. What does Smith mean by an "esoteric person" and an "exoteric person"? Can a person be both or either at different times? What type describes you best?
15. Which "rib" of the Christian worldview speaks to you most (one you think Smith is right on)? Why?
16. Are there any other "ribs" that Smith should have included in the Christian worldview?