

## The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition

Huston Smith, a distinguished scholar of world religions, writes with great love about his own religion, Christianity, in "The Soul of Christianity". He presents a religion that is both relevant and profound. Smith notes in his preface: 1) his book is not a complete account of Christianity—it is restricted to Christian faith; 2) his book is not a scholarly treatise; 3) his book is not combative—he presents his interpretation of Christianity without arguing against others.

### Prologue

Huston Smith relates a story of a student who had realized his "deep longing to be at home in the world" after reading Plato's "Allegory of the Cave". Each of us has a deep hunger. "There is within us—in even the blithest, most light-hearted among us—a fundamental dis-ease. It acts like an unquenchable fire that renders the vast majority of us incapable in this life of ever coming to full peace. This desire lies in the marrow of our bones and deep in the regions of our soul.... Whether we realize it or not, simply to be human is to long for release from mundane existence with its confining walls of finitude and mortality." (p. xii-xiii) Christianity can fulfill that longing.

### Introduction

In the introduction Huston Smith writes about the disastrous effect of the secular worldview has had on the human spirit because it believes that we're all there is; the only reality is what your five senses tell you (no transcendent reality, no God); we are sufficient unto ourselves—we're alone. Some people are slowly coming to realize how the secular assumption has destroyed what is an essential part of being human, what made life meaningful. This slow realization is what he calls the "second revolution". The passage I think is worth the price of the book is:

"The second revolution [of the human spirit]---through which we are now living but which remains undernoticed---is constructive, for it brings God back into the picture. It is occurring because we now see clearly where secularism went wrong. It equated two things, *absence-of-evidence* and *evidence-of-absence*, which when one stops to think about it, are very different. The fact that science cannot get its hands on anything except nature is no proof that nature (alternatively, matter) is all that exists. Moreover, it is self-evident that other things *do* exist. Science spins off from our physical senses, primarily vision; the entire scientific world is an enlargement by microscopes and telescopes of what we can see. But for all its importance, vision can't take in everything. No one has ever seen a thought. No one has ever seen a feeling. Yet our thoughts and feelings are where we primarily live our lives. It goes without saying that in the scientific picture, we figure as robots in a meaningless world. Fortunately, common sense keeps breaking through to disrupt the scientific picture, which is a far cry from common sense and at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Christian worldview. The Christian worldview is drenched with meaning throughout. Christians don't seek meaning. Along with other traditional people (traditional cultures are invariably religious), they eat it, drink it, swim in it, and become it. For the most part they don't even bother to ask if life is meaningful. They take for granted that it is.

So secularism, though it gained a foothold during the first great revolution described above, is now losing ground. With only the nontraditional portion of the world to work with, and with its fatal mistake---equating absence-of-evidence with evidence-of-absence---now exposed, modernity's (past-tense) scenario reads like this:

Beginning by ensconcing science as the royal road to knowledge (and conveniently overlooking the fact that humanity is fallen and in need of redemption from its sinful nature), modernity went on to predict that technology would ensure unending progress. Endless progress through the technological application of continuous scientific discovery---this is what modernity's scenario comes down to. And because it was founded on an illusion (the illusion that the scientific method is omniscient) it was inevitable that sooner or later it would bump into reality---in this case, history. And it now has, with a vengeance. The twentieth century, the most barbaric in history, makes the myth of progress read like a cruel joke: 160 million human beings slaughtered by their own kind; more people dying of starvation in a single decade than in all of history up to the twentieth century; AIDS epidemics in Africa and elsewhere; the widening gap between the rich and the poor; the environmental crisis; the threat of nuclear holocaust---the list goes on and on." (p. xvi-xvii)

**Technology:** most advances have been in either better weapons or new gadgets that temporarily satisfy our desire for instant stimulation.

### ***Unstable Institutions***

- *Science:* more focused on economic/business application rather than fundamental research/comprehensive approaches
- *Technology:* disproportionate investment in either weapons or new gadgets that are not really needed.
- *Business:* mergers with little if any government restraint; dollar is almighty and rich/poor gap ever-widening.
- *Education:* primary education woefully under-funded; higher education now just training institute for new jobs (focused on creating productive widgets in the economic system) and getting grants---no longer give students perspective and understanding. If higher education's main purpose is to simply give people a piece of paper so that they can get a higher-paying job, the students will not want to think "out of the box" and will not want to be skeptical of their government's or company's desires for their lives.
- *Religion:* hamstrung between liberals and conservatives. Fundamentalist biblical literalism unworkable and narrowly dogmatic & uncompassionate. Liberals have lost sense of transcendence and now just have humanistic morality.
- *Media:* now big business with mergers reducing range of opinions; investigation and education of public take back seat to being corporate/government mouthpieces and entertainment.
- *Art:* by and large no longer transports us to higher planes of reality (because transcendence is denied). Various channels today: abstract art, satire, and hopefully authentic self-expression.

Nick Strobel's notes on "The Soul of Christianity" by Huston Smith

- *Government*: Business interests run the show and Christianity has been hijacked for political purposes.
- *Individualism*: "culture of narcissism"—no right higher than the right to choose what one believes, wants, needs or must possess. No sense of community or responsibility to our fellow humans. Yet there is a collective mood that something is missing.

The mistake of equating "absence of evidence" with "evidence for absence" is now beginning to be corrected and Smith will try to contribute to that. This book champions Christianity by telling the Christian story in a way that is more persuasive than secularism's attack on it.

**Questions:**

1. Where did modern secularism "go wrong"? Do you agree with his diagnosis?
2. What does Smith mean when he says secularism confuses "absence of evidence" with "evidence for absence"?
3. Of the modern institutions Smith lists as unstable or not working today, which is the most "broken one"? Which has the most significant impact on our society today?
4. Which of the institutions that Smith lists as unstable or broken do you disagree with his assessment? Which one(s) do you think Smith is right on in his assessment? Why?