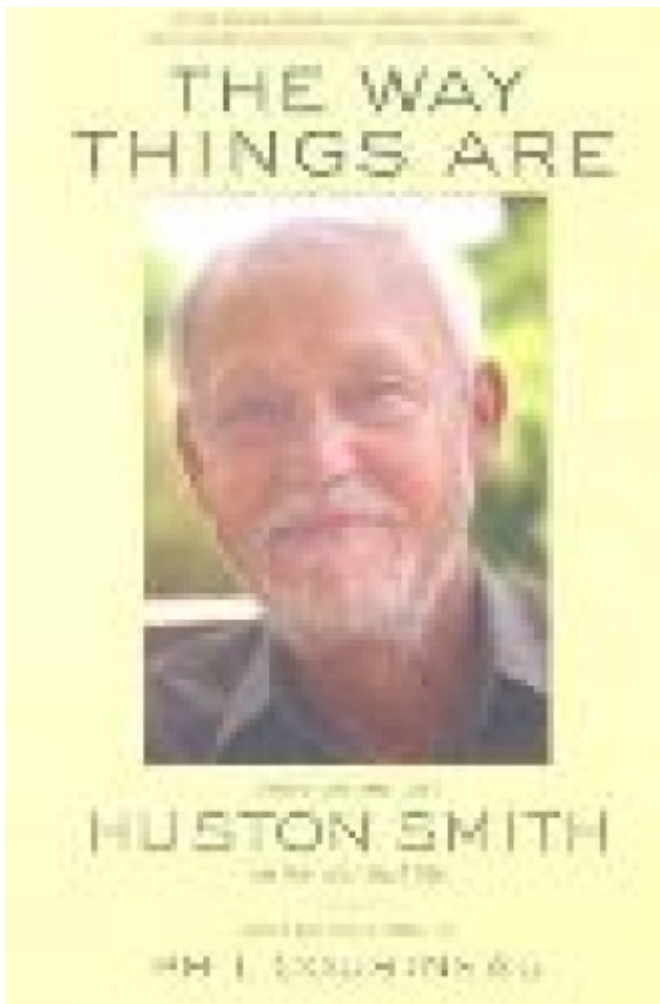


The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith on the Spiritual Life

reviewed by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith

Huston Smith; Phil Cousineau, ed.
University of California Press

It's amazing and comforting to realize that world religions scholar Huston Smith, 84, has been toiling in the fields of the Lord for more than 40 years, teaching more than one generation of students and readers the many names by which the Lord is called. As a white-haired eminence, Smith has earned a volume that will introduce yet another generation to his capacious and respectful understanding of the necessity and function of religion.

Phil Cousineau, who has collaborated with Smith on previous projects and whose own work concentrates on the mythic underpinnings of modern culture, has compiled interviews with Smith, a majority of them conducted during the 1990s. Smith's erudition, wit and conviction are engagingly displayed in wide-ranging exchanges. In his preface, Cousineau cites cross-cultural praise for the art of conversation, ranging from Caliph Ali Ben Ali to American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, "[who] confided to a friend that he would gladly walk a hundred miles through a snowstorm for one good conversation."

At the heart of these conversations is Smith's lifelong conviction that religion matters. (He titled his 2001 book about the subject *Why Religion Matters*.) People engage in religious beliefs and practices not because they are weak-minded or seek an ideology that justifies oppression or terror. Rather, religion expresses some relationship or tie—from the Latin *religare*, to bind—to the Absolute, to "the way things are." The Transcendent around which religions constellate themselves has different names and forms, and comparative-religionist Smith, who has taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Syracuse University and the University of California, Berkeley, has always taken pains to repeat that those differences matter, that the particular cultural forms that religion assumes partly account for its persuasiveness and persistence. Smith has worked hard at balancing with intellectual integrity the divine universal and its particular manifestations, steering a Buddhalike middle way between the Scylla of "religious parity"—his words for indiscriminately lumping together all divine revelations—and the Charybdis of "rank ordering the religions"—his words for deciding how much "truth sufficient unto salvation" each religion holds.

If this qualified universalism goes against the postmodern grain, so too does his involvement with the religions he has studied and taught. He has studied yoga at an Indian ashram, sat with his Zen Buddhist roshi, dervish-danced with Sufis and used peyote with Native Americans. He has talked with Aldous Huxley, the Dalai Lama,

Joseph Campbell and D. T. Suzuki. In a television interview Bill Moyers asks Smith about the danger of “losing his objectivity” and proselytizing students. Smith responds,

I really try to make myself a plate glass window, so [students are] not listening to me, they're not looking at me, they're looking at these wisdom traditions and what they say. . . . I admit I'm a proselytizer in one sense for the wisdom traditions. But if somebody is uninterested, I'm not a missionary in the sense of seeking them out.

Smith's parents were Methodist missionaries. Smith spent the first 17 years of his life in China and has retained a cross-cultural frame of reference. He speaks in a 1996 interview of rediscovering the Christian faith of his childhood without ever having abandoned it, citing the observation of a friend who told him, “Huston, you are the only Confucian Methodist I know. The only reason you stay with the Methodist Church is filial piety and ancestor worship.”

In the religiously plural world Smith has interpreted, he can be a well-informed apologist for religion in general rather than for any one particular expression of it. Understood as the human striving for the highest that necessarily takes some institutional form, religion can use champions in this spiritual-but-not-religious age. Its critics got fresh and considerable ammunition in the 9/11 terrorist attack, which was ostensibly motivated by religion but happened within a context of political relationships not marked by religious understanding. Religion needs more of the light that Smith shines on it, the better to distinguish the forces of darkness that also persist.