

Lifting our gaze

by [Dale T. Irvin](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief. By Huston Smith. HarperSanFrancisco, 277 pp., \$25.00.

Huston Smith's interests have always been eclectic. The child of Protestant missionaries to China, he grew up in Asia. During the 1960s he associated with Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary, and was known for his defense of entheogenic (or hallucinogenic) plants and chemicals for religious purposes. (He recently published a collection of his writings on the subject, titled *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals.*) Over the past 50 years Smith has held professorates at a host of distinguished institutions, including MIT, Syracuse and the University of California, Berkeley. His appearance on Bill Moyers's recent PBS series on religion has made his face familiar to many.

Smith has consistently made the case for what he calls "the big picture." The traditional worldview of metaphysics and religion that flourished prior to the modern era understood ultimate reality to be spiritual, and the material universe to be derived from something greater than itself. In his latest book Smith argues that science, along with its attendant philosophies of naturalism and materialism, has systematically eclipsed this big picture. Modern science has constructed a narrow tunnel into which it leads all who would follow it. "We have dropped Transcendence not because we have discovered something that proves it nonexistent. We have merely lowered our gaze," he writes. Smith's book attempts to lead us out of the tunnel and to lift our gaze again to a universe filled with beauty and purpose.

He begins by analyzing the tunnel and its construction. Scientism is its floor, higher education and law are its walls and the media its roof. The latter three institutions, Smith argues, have collaborated with science to diminish our capacity to experience transcendence through religion. Smith tries to draw a big picture for us today, standing as we are on the other side of both modernity and postmodernity. He makes the case for the traditional religious worldview in order to expand our consciousness and enable us to experience again the mystery of spirit.

As Smith himself acknowledges, *Why Religion Matters* does not offer any new insights or ideas. His purpose is to present the case for religion over science simply and directly, sounding the alarm so that all who hear it will awaken and be saved. I use this last term intentionally, for salvation is what religions are all about. If science reduces the range of vision that religion offers, it reduces religion's capacity to save.

By the same token, however, Smith recognizes that the case against science cannot be mounted on its own grounds of rationalism, empiricism and objectivity. The case for religion must be made on religion's grounds, not according to the reductionist methods of empirical, scientific proofs. For this reason he does not so much try to argue his case as to demonstrate it. The result reads like a lengthy, strolling conversation between a great mind and its peers, whom the mind is seeking to reawaken to a sense of the mystical wonder that has inspired human beings through the ages.

Unfortunately, this can sometimes make the book frustrating to read. Instead of arguments we are treated to a steady stream of anecdotes. At one point Smith tells us that his wife has just reminded him of something that happened during a dinner he once had with Aldous Huxley. Twice he tells us that as he was sitting down to write the chapter that we are now reading, a book absolutely perfect for making his point just happened to come across his desk (once he suggests that the occurrence was the work of Providence).

Smith seems unwilling to remain focused on a particular line of thought. He often depends upon quotes from other sources to make his point, offering them without commentary or discussion before moving on. Bypassing consideration of the merits of a particular individual's ideas, he will relate instead an experience he had in sharing a conference podium or being at a faculty event with that person. At times arguments are made ad hoc. He temporarily sets aside Buddhism and other East Asian religions because they do not support the religious planks he believes have been removed by the scientific world-view.

When Smith finally does get around to engaging physics, biology and cognitive psychology, he does so with a brevity that distorts these scientific endeavors. Without considering arguments to the contrary, he asserts that a hierarchical ordering of reality and a division between the sacred and the profane are essential to the religious worldview.

Yet the book is not without value. Of greatest interest to me was the author's openness to a new alliance among religionists right, left and center. Smith has long argued that the world's enduring religions make similar claims about ultimate reality. Most would regard this as a position belonging to the religious liberal camp. But Smith also turns to allies associated with the conservative camp. George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University* is cited as the flagship book for Smith's discussion of the complicity of higher education in constructing the tunnel of science. Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief* plays a similar role in Smith's argument that the prevailing legal culture has become hostile toward religion.

While not a creationist, Smith takes issue with a recent Supreme Court ruling that restricts the teaching of theistic alternatives to evolution on the basis that it amounts to establishing religion. His sympathetic treatment of William Jennings Bryan, his reconsideration of the issues at stake in the 1925 Scopes trial, and his observations regarding the recent Kansas Board of Education decision about teaching evolution--all point us in the direction of a new configuration of questions and concerns about religion and science in American public life.

Smith has often struck me as a pilgrim, visiting the holy sites of the world's enduring religious traditions in search of spiritual insights and wisdom to share with all who would listen. He sometimes underplays the incommensurable aspects of the various traditions he has encountered, beginning with the fact that many believers do not share his perception that a common religious sensibility exists. He also tends to underplay the failures and abuses that religions have too often fostered. However, Smith is not concerned here with such questions, but with the reestablishment of a worldview that contains "the winnowed wisdom of the human race . . . found distilled in the world's great, enduring religions."