

**Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist**  
**“Why Religion Matters”**  
**The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins**  
**February 14, 2010**

**Reading:**

“At the Smithville Methodist Church”

It was supposed to be Arts and Crafts for a week,  
but when she came home  
with the “Jesus Saves” button, we knew what art  
was up, what ancient craft.

She liked her little friends. She likes the songs  
they sang when they weren’t  
twisting and folding paper into dolls.  
what could be so bad?

Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith  
in good men was what  
we had to do to stay this side of cynicism,  
that other sadness.

O.K., we said, one week. But when she came home  
singing “Jesus love me,  
the Bible tells me so,” it was time to talk.  
Could we say Jesus

doesn’t love you? Could I tell her the Bible  
is a great book certain people use  
to make you feel bad? We sent her back  
without a word.

It had been so long since we believed, so long  
since we needed Jesus  
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was  
sufficiently dead,

that our children would think of him like Lincoln  
or Thomas Jefferson.  
Soon it became clear to us: you can’t teach disbelief  
to a child,

only wonderful stories, and we hadn’t a story  
nearly so good.  
On parent’s night there were the Arts and Crafts  
all spread out

like appetizers. Then we took our seats  
in the church and the children sang a song about the Ark,  
and Hallelujah

and one in which they had to jump up and down for Jesus,  
I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain  
about what's comic, what's serious.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.  
you can't say to your children  
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks  
of extinction and nothing.

Exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have  
a wonderful story for my child  
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car  
she sang for songs.

Occasionally standing up for Jesus.  
There was nothing to do  
but drive, ride it out, sing along  
in silence.

### **Part I: Introduction**

One of the joys of being a Unitarian Universalist is the opportunity I have had to spend time with some of the great theologians, poets and scholars of our time. I have spent time with May Sarton and Wendell Berry, and Mary Oliver. Several years ago I had the special privilege of spending an afternoon with Huston Smith the noted scholar of comparative religions. He had just received an award for his new book titled, "Why Religion Matters" and he was thrilled to talk about it with a group of Unitarian Universalist ministers.

I was especially excited about meeting with Huston Smith because he was the author of the book, The World's Religions, which I had been teaching for over 20 years in churches, conferences, and on the university level. We had never met but I felt a connection with him because we both were graduates of Central Methodist College, a small liberal arts college in Fayette, Missouri.

In this book Dr. Smith sheds some light on an old question—the relationship between science and religion. In the introduction to the book Smith wrote:

In different ways, the East and the West are going through a single common crisis whose cause is the spiritual condition of the modern world. That condition is characterized by loss—the loss of religious certainties and of transcendence with its larger horizons . . . When, with the inauguration of the scientific worldview, human beings started considering themselves the bearers of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, meaning began to ebb and the stature of humanity to diminish. The world lost its human dimension, and we began to lose control of it. (p. 1)

There is an irony to this crisis. The growth of science came because of the tremendous growth in knowledge. We humans are now more knowledgeable about how the world operates than we have ever been. We see more. We know more. We can do more than ever before.

We can watch robots explore Mars or cameras look out into the far reaches of our galaxy and beyond. The irony is that this leap of knowledge, understanding and technology has also caused a crisis of faith. How can we believe in science and continue to have a faith?

When I read this book by Huston Smith I felt he was speaking to us. One critic calls this book controversial and "likely to spark heated debate for years to come." (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette). Smith may not please the fundamentalist or the secular humanist. He is a religious liberal because he looks for truth in all the religions of the world. There is no one truth.

This belief challenges the fundamentalists. Smith also challenges the humanistic scientist as well. I will let him speak for himself. Smith asks, "What is obvious to me?" His answer:

First, that the finitude of mundane existence cannot satisfy the human heart completely. Built into the human makeup is a longing for a “more” that the world of everyday experience cannot require.

What Smith advocates and what attracted me to this religion thirty eight years ago is the belief in the God of nature. Smith says it this way: “With God and the world categorically distinguished but nowhere disjoined other things fall into place. . .” (p. 4) Smith refers to a conversation with a journalist who remarked that Smith seemed to be angry at science. Smith vehemently rejects this he says:

I am angry at *us*—modern Westerners who, forsaking clear thinking, have allowed ourselves to become so obsessed with life’s material underpinnings that we have written science a blank check. I am not talking about money here; I am talking about a blank check for science’s claims concerning what constitutes knowledge and justified belief.

As I have said, Smith challenges both the fundamentalist in that there is not one truth and he challenges the scientist who rejects all belief and limits our way of knowing.

## **Part II: Stages of History**

What Smith does in this book is present three stages of history relative to the question before us, the question of the crisis of faith because of the advance of science. The first stage is the traditional society, previously described as “primitive.” The period of traditionalism began with the beginnings of human beings and ended with the rise of modern science. This is the time when spirit mattered to the exclusion of matter. God and nature were one. Humans were content to be in the world, because the world came from God. Humans came from God. Humans are the less, God is the more. Smith writes, “Trailing clouds of glory, they carry within themselves traces of their noble origins. Humans look to their ancestors and to God for their nobility.” (p. 34) Also,

The important buildings were temples; statues were of gods and saints; legends, songs, and dances wore the cast of morality plays; and holidays lived up to being holy days. Reminders of the sacred were everywhere, strewn about almost carelessly, we might say. (p. 48)

We find this view in Buddhist teachings:

It came to one with the air one breathed. Birds seemed to sing of it; mountain streams hummed its refrain as they bubbled across the stones. A holy perfume seemed to rise from every flower at once a reminder and a pointer to what still needed doing. There were times when a man might have been forgiven for supposing himself already in the Pure Land. (p. 48)

Science turned all of this on its head. Humans became the more. God became the less. This world is all there is. There is no spirit world. Smith laments the second stage because science took away much of what was important in the traditional world. In the modern world materialism became primary. “The line that runs from a materialistic worldview to a materialist philosophy of life,” he concludes “is not a straight one, but it exists all the same.” (p. 48)

## **Science and Scientism**

Huston Smith distinguishes between science and scientism. Science he says is what separates modern societies from traditional societies. The content of science “is the body of facts about the natural world.” Scientism is quite different. It is the belief that the scientific method is the only way of getting at the truth. Scientism is the belief that only material things matter.

Smith also says that scientism separates values from knowledge of the world. Liberal religion matters because knowledge cannot be separated from values. Religion matters because it calls into question all that has come before.

Liberal religion matters to me because it affirms free inquiry and challenges dogmatism wherever we find it, including the world of science. Huston Smith talks about a Chinese biologist who says the general practice of science in China is to settle on an official theory in education and then teach it to the exclusion of all others. This is not good science.

### **Religion Matters to Children**

Religion matters for our children and grandchildren. They need to have some answers. What Huston Smith and Joseph Campbell have taught us is that the stories are important for our children and for us. We Unitarian Universalists need to know the stories. We need to teach our children respect for the stories, as well as respect for the scientific truths. Huston Smith reminds us of the stories of Jesus, as well as the stories of Moses, and the Buddha, and Krishna. He writes: "We need not restrict ourselves to the Jesus story, for its counterparts turn up in every tribe and civilization . . . The list has no end."

Smith is criticized from the right for this broad interpretation of religion. Let us not fall into the trap of criticizing him from the left because he is too respectful of religion. Religion does matter.

Liberal religion matters because we need to give our children a respect for science. There needs to be a religion that affirms the scientific method for our children. Marti and I were confronted with this reality several years ago when we learned that her daughter and son-in-law, staunch Southern Baptists, were not going to enroll our grandchildren in public schools. Their reason: their children would be exposed to false truths about evolution instead of the real truths of creationism taught in the Bible.

Marti has done the right thing with her daughter and our grandchildren. She has chosen not to challenge her daughter's religious beliefs. I have always said: "People will have the beliefs they need to survive. Just so they don't force those beliefs on others." Liberal religion should be tolerant and accepting of the beliefs of others, even if we vehemently oppose them for ourselves.

### **Part III: Postmodernism**

The controversial part of this book is the conclusion that the modern age has also brought with it tunnel vision. We feel that all we see is all there is. This leads us to the third stage in this history. It is often referred to as the postmodern era that began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Religion is the light that can get us out of the tunnel. The word religion comes from the Latin word, *religio*, which means to bind together. God for Smith is the name we give to the reality of the religious in our lives. We can define God however we choose to do so. God can be love. God can be Spirit. God can be the divine. He defines God for himself as the presence of the divine in our lives, light or conscience or love. How do we receive the divine in our lives? Smith says it is through consciousness. "Consciousness," he writes, "is not simply an emergent property of life as science assumes, but is instead the initial glimpse we have of Spirit." Consciousness is made up of sensations, dreams, memories, thoughts, and feelings. (p. 265)

The concept of light can help us out of the tunnel. Light can be looked at from all three positions, the traditionalist, the scientist and the postmodernist. Smith writes:

In some such way as this, traditionalists see physics affirming with *Genesis* that in the beginning there was light. And there continues to be light, for light underlies every process of nature, wherever and whenever. Every exchange of energy between atoms involves the exchange of photons. Every interaction in the material world is mediated by light; light penetrates and interconnects the entire cosmos.

All of this can be rather oblique and ethereal. How does this affect his view of life and death? Here Smith becomes very specific. He writes:

After I shed my body, I will continue to be conscious of the life I have lived and the people who remain on earth. Sooner or later, however, there will come a time when no one alive

will have heard of Huston Smith, let alone have known him, whereupon there ceases to be any point in my hanging around. Echoing John Chrysostrom's reported farewell, "Thanks, thanks, for everything; praise, praise, for it all." I will then turn my back on planet earth. . .For me, though—mystic that I am by temperament . . .after oscillating back and forth between enjoying the sunset and enjoying Huston-Smith-enjoying-the-sunset, I expect to find the uncompromised sunset more absorbing. The string will have been cut. The bird will be free. (p. 271)

The role of religion is to unite and not separate us from each other. This is the light at the end of the tunnel—the tunnel being our estrangement. Religion matters because it forces us to ask the important questions of life, not just how things work, but why? What is the meaning of existence? Why is there pain and death? Why, in the end, is life worth living? What does reality consist of and what is its purpose?

### **Conclusion**

In the end, Smith is a religious liberal because he concludes that the final answers are unattainable. We need all the help we can get. It is the religious community that helps our children and us with the answers. It is the religious community that passes on the stories to our children, and gives us models for living. Huston Smith speaks to Unitarian Universalism when he says, quoting from Karl Barth, that we should keep our Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other." (p. 275) Smith reminds our denomination that we are at our core a religious movement and that our view of religion matters. This is seen in our respect for the divine in nature. Smith describes it well. He writes:

As I try to describe the religious sense, my mind goes back to a night when I felt it working in me with exceptional force. My wife and I were spending a week in the dead of winter in Death Valley, California, and on the full-moon night that we were there I awoke around two A.M. to a call that seemed to come from the night itself, a call so compelling that it was almost audible. Hurrying into some clothes, I answered it. Stepping out of doors, I found that not a breath of air was stirring. The sky held no clouds to conceal the panoply of stars ascending from the circling horizon. It was one of those totally magical nights and moments.

For half an hour or so I walked the road, without . . . a thought in my head. It may have been as close as I have ever come to the empty mind that Buddhists work toward for years.

Religion does matter. Science does as well. The good news of this book, "Why Religion Matters" is that science and religion can be joined together. Scientists can use words like "adventure" and "imagination." They can talk about wanting to find out where we came from and how studying Mars can help us find some of the answers. Religion and science both ask the important questions.

We often hear that scientists are objective and religion is subjective. I have seen scientists who view machines as real people. They talk about rovers going to sleep, waking up in the morning, calling home, giving information, walking across mars and coming back to its landing.

The work of the scientist is religious in nature. It is visionary, and expansive. Science is not a narrowing tunnel but an opening to a larger world. The best scientists are visionaries. Evidently, the NASA scientists would agree. They named the rovers traversing or parked on mars now for six years, "Spirit" and "Opportunity." Spirit means breath. I don't think the rover is breathing on Mars. It is not alive. It does not have a religion. The Rover would not be there if it were not for the scientists with passion, and vision, and hope for the future.

Science is a human endeavor. We breathe. We live. We find meaning and purpose in a painful world. We come together on Sunday morning to affirm our stance toward life and to help us look at the larger picture. And we ask, "What am I, this small speck in the universe of time, looking for joy, and meaning and community, in the name of love, and light?" Religion and science do matter especially when they work together.