

Christianity stretched/painted on the religion frame

A review of Huston Smith's THE SOUL OF CHRISTIANITY: Restoring the Great Tradition (HarperSanFrancisco/05)

1 The title announces the book's subject (negatively, not our religion's body [institutional-historical]); the subtitle, its aim (restorationist, esp. with a view to reaching--as Schleiermacher in his time--"religion's cultured despisers").

2 It's the most personal book of "America's best-loved religion tutor" (Jack Miles, on the jacket). No apology for "I"-references. Nor do I apologize for "I" in this review: in '41, when he was fresh out of college (& I was at work on my fourth degree in religion), he & I had frequent & extensive conversations.

Going to college with the intent of following in the steps of his parents (Methodist missionaries in China), he switched from religion to philosophy upon discovering--the first week!--his power to philosophize.

3 AN ANALOGY: Alpha house here in Craigville Mass. was built (on a 14-foot wide tent site!) in 1872 (the first year of "Christian [denomination] Camp Meetings") on sand. A few years ago, it was lifted onto rails & a substantial basement built under it. To survive, a religion must have a philosophical basement for the mind, the intellect, to move around in & provide both support & intellectual respectability. But danger! If the excavating-substructing is poorly done, the house may fall into what was intended to be its basement!

That collapse happened to the orthodox (classical Methodist) religion Huston brought to college: what he brought to graduate school ('41, U.Chicago) was a philosophical commitment to step back from but also forward into all the world's religions--which led to his classic, THE RELIGIONS OF MAN (later, under feminist pressure, THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS). I tried to persuade him to rebuild, & rejoice in that first word in his subtitle (after a 64-year gap).

4 This prefaces the p32 insert above: "In the preceding pages, I have presented the Christian worldview in fifteen component parts. Compressed into a single paragraph consisting of topic sentences, that worldview reads like this:" The immediately following paragraph further collapses the "Christian worldview" into one sentence--which has no religious (not to mention Christian) words--is entirely philosophical! Is not his religion-house still collapsed into its philosophy-basement? The very next sentence only deepens this suspicion: "If this doesn't sound distinctively Christian, the reason is that it isn't. It is the worldview of all authentic, which is to say *revealed*, religions." In religion, "revelation" captures the "soul" (of the individual or group or movement): but Huston here captures religion in the net of his philosophical doctrine of authenticity--his basement, his base, on which any of the world's "authentic" religions could be placed. In this book, he's placing on it his parental-familial religion, which the book beautifully & powerfully describes. He is primarily a philosopher, specifically a metaphysician (concerned about the being of being [i.e., ontology] & the order of being [i.e., cosmology]). I think I don't exaggerate in saying that's his commitment: Christianity is only his belief.

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.

And now that same Christian worldview compressed even further, into a sentence: the world is perfect, and the human opportunity is to see that and conform to that fact.

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5 Confirming my view that Huston's religio-philosophical base(ment) could serve as substructure to any of the world's religions, is this (p34) painting-analogy: as Noam Chomsky discovered "the universal grammar that is programmed [by "intelligent design"?!] into the human brain and from which the grammar of all spoken languages conform. The first part of this book does the same thing with religions: it outlines the universal grammar of religion to which (in their various idioms) all religions conform....[This book's] Part One established the fixed points on which the Christian story is stretched like canvas on a frame." (Underlinings, mine.)

6 The analogy is appropriately esthetic: the author describes as "beautiful" his experience of writing this book. He does well in (re)painting "The Christian Story" (Part Two), but one is left wondering whether his faith is more in the (philosophical) frame than in the painting (e.g., typically [e.g., p35], he describes Christians as they not we: not "we Christians believe" but "Christians believe," not "our break with Judaism" but "their break with Judaism." In this, the book is observation, not witness--& there's something to be said for the positions-switch.

And the esthetic perspective fits Huston, who's more priest (appreciator of all the world's religions) than prophet (critic). E.g., *ibid*: "Buddhism and Christianity are world religions, while Hinduism and Judaism are ethnic religions" (& I add, Islam is both): to quote the Queen of Hearts, "all have won and all shall have prizes." Saying more "yes" than "no" to all religions has predictably made this author popular, though I'd not accuse him of that as motive. His focus, however, IS "the first millenium" of Christianity, "classical Christianity, or the Great Traditon." (*Ibid*)

But he's more than the esthete his friend "Joe" (Joseph Campbell, an "unbeliever") was: Joe was only into "The Power of Myth" (his PBS Bill Moyers series): Huston is into "the truth of myth." Sometimes he sounds like Voltaire's Dr.Pangloss ("the best of all possible worlds"), but he goes deeper with David Bentley Hart's THE BEAUTY OF THE INFINITE.

7 The bookjacket is correct: Here, Huston "stakes out a path between...culturally rigid, intolerant evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity and nontranscendent, liberal Christianity. He presents...a vital alternative...a deeper more authentic faith...that guided the Church for its first thousand years." Correct, but (as jackets tend to be) an oversell, distorting the two rejected positions.

8 My most recent conversation with Huston was right after he'd publicly referred to his years of teaching philosophy at MIT. He's long been attentive to the two languages, math the language of science (which deals with commensurables) & symbolism, "the science of the relations between the multiple levels of reality" (p23). Intuition & reason are involved in our use of both technical languages.* But the West has tragically overrated the former way of knowing & devalued the latter: modernity's mistake (with its disastrous consequences for the human spirit)....It's mistake...was the inability to distinguish absence-of-evidence from evidence-of-absence....the fact that science cannot get its hands on supernatural things such as God is no proof that they don't exist."

9 The book's most personal page is 165: "...our missionary home in traditional China"...morning devotions (in Chinese: the Lord's Prayer still "trips off my tongue as easily in Chinese as in English")...prepared me to tell the Christian story from the inside." At work, "I would find myself singing lines from hymns in which the ideas I was writing about would burst into song. And I seldom had to reach for my Bible to check my quotations, for they were in my head and in my life.

"That is the story behind the Christian story I have written. Huston Smith, Berkeley, California." Next sentence, two pages later: "My chief debt is to my parents who, in a close-knit missionary family in rural China, instilled in me a Christianity that was able to withstand the dominating secular culture of modernity and emerge with this book." (Underlining, mine.)

viii: "first-millenium Christianity...the solid trunk of the [Christian] tree....the voice of peace, justice, and beauty that emanates from the Christian soul and which (in the company of other authentic religions) the world desperately needs."

* "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant."--Einstein

