

Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief

Huston Smith, **Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief**, United States of America, HarperCollins, 2001, 304 pp.

Reviewed By: Muhammad Ali Shahbaz*

Huston Smith is widely regarded as the most eloquent and accessible contemporary authority on the history of religions. He has taught at Washington University, M.I.T, Syracuse University and the University of California. In this book he raised the issue of crisis of religion in the modern and postmodern age and the growing spirit of disbelief based on the philosophy of materialism. The crisis of religious belief emerged with the rise of rationalism in 16th century Europe when it was passing through an age of 'Enlightenment'. After the tumbling in dark ages, the West reorganized itself under the umbrella of ancient Greek and medieval Muslim philosophies taking them a step further to develop the scientific method which along with the help of colonial project lifted Europe into the state of modernism. Unfortunately, the ideals of modernism were based on the superiority of materialism over all other philosophies which pushed Europe going into the crisis of religious belief.

This book is a kind of personal struggle for faith of the author 'to keep it intact in the face of modern winds of doctrine that assail it' (p. viii). He has divided the book into two parts and they can be thought of as the statement of the problem and its possible solution. He symbolized the spiritual crisis as the 'tunnel of the modernity' (p. 9) and thus the first part of the book discovers the structure of the tunnel and the second part searches for the resolution of the crisis symbolized as the 'light at the tunnel's end' (p. 5). The author starts each new chapter with quotations from various authors and he takes a flagship book to open up the issues discussed in many chapters of the two parts of the book.

* Ph.D. Scholar at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

In the first three chapters the question of true picture of reality is discussed in the light of various schools of thought like modernism, postmodernism and traditional worldview. The modernity gave way to the scientific method which became a worldview by *assuming* that it can be used to study all that exists. In this respect science gained immense popularity by its achievements both in abstract ideas as well as its practical value. But the traditional or postmodern views could not present anything new against the modern cosmology. However the postmodernism seems to succeed in studying the society. The traditional view could not cope with the emerging trends of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' of modern world. Also the modernity could not cope with its own breed and went into plundering and distancing itself from the world in the shape of colonialism, fascism and communism etc. Then there is an issue of metaphysics, a world beyond human senses. Here also modernity negates metaphysics and rests on materialism or naturalism which accepts the non-material things like feelings and consciousness but treating them as emergent phenomena of material reality. The postmodernists went even further to negate not only metaphysics but the whole concepts of 'reality' or worldview. It is this third problem of metaphysics or worldview which the author likes to discuss in detail.

The author compares the traditional and scientific worldview by five concepts or ideas of spirit, creation, ending of life, meaning of life and the world as homeland. The scientific worldview alienates human beings from the world and leaves them into estrangement from life. Also the scientific method is unjustified in its negation of a transcendent world above this material plane of existence. This state of modern life is symbolized in William Gass's 1995 book 'The Tunnel' (p. 45) which our present author took as 'The Flagship Book'. The author rejects the gloomy ideas of the flagship book rendering them the result of postmodern thought but keeps the idea of the tunnel which he further solidified by referring to T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' and also 'The Hollow Men' (p. 46). He then presents his case with four crime partners named scientism, higher education, media and the law which pushed the modern human beings into the tunnel. Here he often refers to a vast collection of governmental policies and reports from various newspapers to strengthen his case against the tools of modernity.

After describing the structure of the tunnel as shaped by forces of materialism and scientism, the author opens up the second part of the book by asking whether we can see any light at the end of the tunnel or not? The metaphor of 'Light' is used for God. Although the present scientific method is insufficient to prove or demonstrate God's existence, yet its ideas can be used to point towards Him and the concept of light in modern physics serves this purpose well. The modern physics treats light as having dual nature of waves and particles and Einstein's relativity concludes that light stands outside the matrices of space, time and matter that govern all of its creations. Quantum Physics highlights the active role of observer in cognition. The author swiftly moves to show the increasing light at the end of tunnel. He based his hope mainly on five points which are Fairness Revolution, Human Nature, Physics, Cognitive Science and Biology.

The Fairness Revolution is actually the state of today's world whereby the idols of past are being turned over. The civil rights movement in USA or the Human Rights Commissions set by authorities as well as the voices against the violence on minorities and women emancipation, the failure of colonialism in many parts of the world and the rise of new intellect is a hope. The Freudian concept of love and hatred has been challenged and compassion or communal desires are being said to be the basic instincts of human nature. The cognitive science has unleashed the insufficiency of reductionism to resolve the mind-body dualism and the hard problem of consciousness. The biological advancement in molecular biology and genetics has challenged the simple Darwinian evolutionary model and has not moved further to explain sexual behaviour, social psychology of humans, love and hatred etc.

In the last three chapters of the book, the author returns to the idea of the Big Picture or worldview of religion. Here he compares the atheistic, polytheistic, monotheistic and finally mystic worldviews. The author addresses the modern investigators to change their bottom-up approach towards reality and watch the multiplicity out of wholeness or oneness. He proposes to see or picture the physical universe encircled by the whole reality as the framework of religion. The author beautifully

quotes Oliver Wendell Holmes as “Science gives us major answers to minor questions, while religion gives us minor answers to major questions” (p. 200).

Huston Smith is considered as the authority on comparative religions and that is more evident from last two chapters where he compares all major religious ideas. He compares scientific law of conservation of matter with religious concept of happy ending of soul or consciousness.

Towards the end of the book the author analyses the religious sense as a ‘distinctive sensibility’ (p. 274) locked into four fold reality namely the ultimate questions as the essence of humanity. He advises his readers to experience the infinite horizons of possibilities and do not limit the sense of life to the dogmatic nature of scientism, modernism or postmodernism.

The book as a whole is a critique on modernism and postmodernism. The traditional worldview is projected as a guide to the unresolved mysteries of the universe. But the author could not justify the basic epistemology of the traditional approach. The author thinks that the religious approach is to grasp the reality in its totality but he leaves the art and poetry which also claim to be interacting with the world in an intuitive manner. At most the book is a justified idea of accepting the unknown mystery, whether it to be religious or artistic.