

## **PROFILE – Huston Smith**

### **Narrator:**

This month on UMC.org Profiles, Huston Smith--author, scholar, and philosopher--shares his faith story.

Huston Smith is one of the today's foremost authorities on the world's great religions. In 1996, Smith was the focus of a Bill Moyers 5-part PBS special called *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith*, which chronicled his life and work studying the world's religions. Smith is the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, at Syracuse University. For fifteen years, he served as Professor of Philosophy at M.I.T., and prior to that taught at Washington University in St. Louis. Most recently, he served as Visiting Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Smith holds twelve honorary degrees, and has written fourteen books, including Why Religion Matters and The World's Religions, which is one of the most widely used college textbooks on comparative religion. His most recent book is The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition. Throughout all of his studies on the world's great religions, Smith has remained a United Methodist.

### **Huston Smith:**

I was born of missionary parents in Soo Chow, China, 50 miles west of Shanghai. We were a close-knit, functional family, so I imbibed my Christianity as the Romans would say "cum lacte" with the mother's milk. And I just grew into it. And it has matured over the years, but I have never left it.

I'm often asked why have I stayed in the Methodist church, when there are so many other denominations, and even other religions, which I have studied and venerate. I take my answer from his holiness, the Dalai Lama, whom I have had a very deep friendship for 35 years. And I heard him ask whether conversion to another religion was ever appropriate, and he said it's better if you can stay in your own tradition, because you are imprinted with its form, and its music, and its liturgy, and Christmas carols and the like. However, if you've been bruised by your tradition, your religion, why then it is a good idea to look into others and possibly converting. Well, I have never been bruised by my church. I disagree with some of the policies, but just as we can disagree with the policy of the current American administration and still be an American, it's the same way with me.

I'm often asked, because of my study of other religions, my feel as a comparativist in world religions, I am often asked how should Christians relate to other religions. Well, the picture

has changed on that question. My father went to China in the day of the student Christian movement, the slogan of which was to Christianize the world in this generation. And he went out quite literally to save souls that would be going to hell if they were not converted to Christianity. Well times have changed, and there is a very healthy ecumenical movement. So I think the way Christians should approach other religions is to exemplify their faith and, on appropriate occasions, when asked about it and why we have chosen to give our lives to Christianity, we should answer forthrightly, but we should not proselytize in any other way than that we should not try to strong-arm others into our faith. It would be actually be un-Christian to do that.

In my recent book, [The Soul of Christianity](#), I say one of the problems of Christianity today is that it's polarized between the mainline churches, liberal churches, and the dogmatic conservatives. The mainline churches have adapted too much to our current secular culture. The conservatives are trapped in dogmatic literalism, which isn't true to the Bible actually, but terribly dogmatic. And so the Christianity in America today is hand strung between the liberals that are losing ground, and the conservatives that are stuck in a dogmatic literalism that cannot hold up. There is a third factor, and that is hijacked religion – political parties claiming God is on their side. So if I were writing this recent book again, I would say not hand strung between two opposing, ineffective parties, but a tripod of three inroads on the main central method, which it doesn't wash it out but it dilutes it.

That's why in the *Soul of Christianity*, the subtitle is *Restoring the Great Tradition*. And my strategy there is to concentrate on the first millennium before there were any splits between the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and then later the Protestant Reformation. And I think that is the trunk of the Christian tree. And I think every Christian can adhere to that first millennium Christianity, when the Bible and the creeds were set down. There will always be branches and twigs, but nevertheless the central trunk will be predominant and preeminent.

I have given my career to immersing not just my intellect and knowledge in the eight great religions that have most effected human history, but I have also engaged in their practices. So when Bill Moyers completed his 5-part PBS special *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith*, Newsweek had a two-page spread on the series. And they liked it a lot, and they came up with an amazing headline: Huston Smith – Spiritual Surfer. That's a great headline, but it's not actually true. I used two metaphors. Christianity has always been my meal, but I'm a great believer in vitamin supplements. And I glean spiritual vitamins from these other religions, and they weave their way through my life, and they make it more spiritually healthy. But you can't live on vitamins only. And my meal is Christianity. My other metaphor is a basketball player pivoting, the left foot planted in the same place, and the right foot moving from place to place.

There is a kind of fad today in new age religion that I call the cafeteria approach. A kind of do-it-yourself religion, in which you take a little bit from this one, and a little bit from Buddhism, and something from Tai Chi from China, and maybe some Hatha yoga. The trouble with that cafeteria approach is that most of the people who go down the cafeteria take what they like. They don't necessarily take what they need. Nutritionists know a lot about what we need. And if we knew what we need when we went down that line, we would be at the end of the religious journey, not the beginners that we all are in ways.

**Narrator:**

Our thanks to Huston Smith for sharing his story with us.

This month's Profile was produced by Cindy Caldwell and Pam Price; interview by Rich Peck; editor was Lane Denson. I'm Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.