

## DOES THEOLOGY HAVE ANY CONTENT?

JASON ROSENHOUSE

A Review of *Why Religion Matters; The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*, by Huston Smith, Harper Collins, 2001, 290 pages, paperback. ISBN 0-06-067102-5, 14.95

[Physicists] do not laugh when a fellow scientist, Dale Kohler, writes “We have been scraping away at physical reality all these centuries, and now the layer of the remaining little that we don’t understand is so thin that God’s face is staring right out at us.” (p. 177)

Huston Smith believes that scientism has infiltrated every aspect of modern society, from the media to the law to academia. By spreading their blinkered belief that science is the most reliable, if not the only, road to knowledge of the world, arrogant materialist scientists have abused the respect granted to them. Theology has been unfairly maligned. “My shelf of books on science for the laity,” he writes, “is as long as my shelves on each of the major world religions, but I will be very much surprised if you can say as much from your side. (p. 273)”

Since Smith argues that he has seriously pondered the formidable implications of modern science, since he wishes to present himself as the clear-thinking pluralist confronting militant dogmatism, and since he engages in learned discourse on subjects ranging from quantum mechanics to evolutionary biology to cognitive science, it is not mere churlishness that leads me to observe that Dale Kohler, the noted scientist at whom physicists do not laugh, is a fictional character. He exists nowhere outside John Updike’s novel *Roger’s Version*. It’s a blunder typical of this shallow and superficial book.

Smith sees modern physics and cognitive science as allies in his quest to gain respect for theology. One suspects that Smith understands nothing of these subjects (statements like, “In lay language, what the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen experiment demonstrates is that if you separate two interacting particles and give one of them a downspin, instantly the other will spin upward (p.174),” do not inspire confidence), but he feels no shame in lecturing on their metaphysical significance.

He trots out the standard clichés of the field; the anthropic principle, nonlocality in quantum mechanics, the intractability of the mind/body problem; but contributes nothing new or insightful.

At least here Smith acknowledges that many professionals do not share his views. Biology is not granted such respect. He is quite certain that evolution is a threat to the feel-good theism he promotes, meaning it must be brushed aside. But he is a busy fellow, who can't be troubled to come up with his own bad arguments. So he boasts of his association with *Icons of Evolution* author Jonathan Wells, and brazenly repeats the charges of fraud and dishonesty leveled therein. That all of Wells' claims have been thoroughly refuted, and that charges of fraud are far more plausibly leveled at him than at biologists, has apparently eluded Smith's radar.

His treatment of theology is no better. He makes vague pleas for respect, but it is not at all clear what theology is or what its methods are. If Smith can offer any means for choosing between the truth claims of rival religions, he does not reveal them in this book.

And what is it that theology has discovered, exactly? Smith regards it as obvious "that the finitude of mundane existence cannot satisfy the human heart completely," that "the reality that excites and fulfills the soul's longing is God by whatsoever name" and that "until modern science arrived, everyone lived with a worldview that conformed to the outline just mentioned (p. 3-4)." Leaving aside the blatant absurdity of this last statement (for example, the polytheism of the ancient Greeks, with their numerous Gods allowing their petty disputes to spill over into the mortal realm, was born out of ignorance, not spiritual longing), what evidence can Smith adduce for the existence of benevolent supernatural entities?

Apparently nothing more than the ubiquity of such belief in human culture. Smith considers the ill-defined intuitions of humanity serious evidence for a theistic worldview. Of course, the pattern of broad agreement coupled with massive local variation, perfectly exemplified by human religious customs, is precisely the sort of thing evolution produces so ably. Darwin himself, in *The Descent of Man*, offered an explanation for how belief in the supernatural could have arisen from various animal instincts. Smith rejects evolution, but offers no explanation for why human intuition, which has so often been faulty in the past, should be accepted over the considered judgment of every branch of the life sciences. And since sacred texts have routinely proven themselves incompetent regarding testable qualities of the natural world, why should they be trusted concerning the supernatural?

Smith fleshes out his simple-mindedness with the standard tools of popular theology; anecdotes contrasting theological modesty with scientific arrogance:

A scientist to review a book on theology? To see what that choice bespeaks, imagine the editors reaching for a theologian to review a book on science. The standard justification for this asymmetry is that science is a technical subject whereas theology is not, but now hear this. Several years back at a conference at Notre Dame University I heard a leading Thomist say in an aside to the paper he was delivering, "There may be, there just may be, twelve scholars alive today who understand St. Thomas, and I am not one of them (p. 66),

folksy asides allowing him to straddle the line between Joe Everyman familiarity and high-minded erudition:

There being (from their point of view) no problem, they will see this entire book as an exercise in paranoia. Because the difference comes down to one of perception, I will plow ahead in the face of that charge (p. 64),

and gibberish passed off as profundity:

And though in the smallest things God's omnipresent omniscience is veiled under the thickest conceivable veil, the tiniest bit of sentience that surfaces in those things is of a kind with omniscience and is backed by it (p. 262).

This is a book with nothing to say. After wading through its nearly three hundred pages, I haven't the faintest idea why religion matters.

*This is an extended version of a review that originally appeared in Free Inquiry, Vol. 22, No. 4, Fall 2002, p. 66.*