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**The Wisdom of Faith
With Huston Smith, Part 5:
A Personal Philosophy**

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The Wisdom of Faith With Huston Smith, Part 5:
Personal Philosophy

BILL MOYERS, Host: I'm Bill Moyers. For half a century, Huston Smith has immersed himself in the world's great religions, but along the way something happened. What began as an intellectual pursuit turned into a spiritual journey. The professor of philosophy became a pilgrim, the object of his intellect now the source of his desire. This happened despite his knowing that the story of religion is a checkered story. Not all is inside and inspiration. Religion is often crude, charity often rare, and some religious expression just plain revolting. Still, Huston Smith found religion to be the sharp edge of a razor, cutting to the very quick of his soul, and that's how he has been teaching it ever since, as if religion really matters.

He tells his students that the goal of faith is not altered states, but altered traits — life transformations. Religion alive, he says, calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake — a journey across the jungles, peaks, and deserts of the human spirit for the purpose of confronting reality.

In this program we will explore with Huston Smith the personal philosophy he has forged from his encounter with the living religions. First, let's return with him to some moments from our series.

HUSTON SMITH: India never had the notion until our century of art for art's sake. Art was a spiritual technology, and it is really very miraculous how art makes easy what otherwise would be difficult. Now, what is otherwise difficult? And the answer is to behave decently to one another.

What is the Zen life itself? We can put it in a formula — infinite gratitude towards all things past; infinite service to all things present; infinite responsibility to all things future.

The yin-yang, symbolizing the opposites of life — good on one side, evil on the other. Each takes up its abode in the deepest citadel of the other by virtue of the black dot in the white domain, and the white dot in the black domain.

The cross, the cross — the central symbol of Christianity. What this symbolizes for the believing Christian is how much God loved his people. What greater love could be shown than the voluntary willingness to take on this agony?

[Sound of singing-chanting]
HUSTON SMITH: It's a living conversation between the human and the divine that goes on generation after generation; probably will have no stop.

[Sound of Mid-Eastern music]
HUSTON SMITH: Most Muslims shun dancing, but for Sufis it is a meditation that brings them to God.

BILL MOYERS: These world religions are converging in modern America — the sacred and the secular coexisting side by side. It is more important than ever, says Huston Smith, to understand how they differ and to grasp the larger truth that all the wisdom traditions, as he calls them, point to.

As a teacher at M.I.T., Syracuse, and Washington University, and now at the University of California at Berkeley, his goal is to lead students to appreciate the spiritual vitality in each great tradition. As a scholar and author, his mission is to understand and communicate the logic of each religion's claim. As a seeker, his

passion has been to grasp the experience of God. This kind of knowing, he has said, lies where language cannot take us. The great religions he likens to stained glass windows, the manifold glimmers of an absolute that is indescribable.

[Interviewing] Is God an objective reality to you?

HUSTON SMITH: Yes. I would want to qualify that because it doesn't — My conviction does not stay on even keel all the time, and there are desert periods of the spirit. I now think of them — "Well, I've got the spiritual flu," because, you know, there are times when I have the bodily flu, and life doesn't feel very good. The body doesn't feel very good. And there are those times, too, in the life of the spirit, but, by and large, my answer to your question is, "Yes." Oh, I wish — Was it H.G. Wells who somebody asked him, "Do you believe in God?" He wasn't overly pious. He once said that the only two things that matter to me are sex and God. But somebody asked him, "Do you believe in God?" He groaned, and said, "God, what else?"

And —
BILL MOYERS: If anything characterizes the modern era, it seems to me it's a loss of faith in transcendence, and yet, here you are, having spent your whole life teaching religion, and teaching about transcendence, and I wonder if you sometimes have the impression that you've been going the wrong way on a one-way street?

HUSTON SMITH: *[Laughs]* No, I don't think I have ever doubted that I was going in the right direction, because from early childhood on, by virtue of my upbringing, which was in a believing family and it was a positive experience — it "took" for me

— I have not wavered in the sense that in the most basic sense, the way they saw reality — and the emphasis was absolutely on transcendence — there is another reality which is more real, more powerful, and better than this mundane order. That has never wavered in my mind. Now, how it is to be conceived has changed all over the map in the ensuing years.

BILL MOYERS: And by transcendence, you mean?

HUSTON SMITH: By transcendence, I mean there is a perfect being which embodies all the positive qualities in — that we experience in this life. Let's tick them off — intelligence, compassion, creativity, the classical virtues of beauty, truth, and goodness. All of these virtues that we experience are like fingers pointing at the moon, the moon being that transcendence. Now, the finger never reaches the moon, but it's very important in pointing in the right direction. And Kendra, my wife, just came home with a book of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, and though this wasn't the book, the title of another one was on it — *All That Rises Must Converge*. That just struck me because these fingers pointing at the moon with these various virtues that I've listed, all converge and come together, and in transcendence they're not separate. They're like melted down so they are all present in an undivided unity which our minds, of course, just smear when we try to imagine.

BILL MOYERS: Of course, the existence of this transcendence is — **HUSTON SMITH:** Not provable. The world is religiously ambiguous and, to my light, always has been and always will be.

BILL MOYERS: And what do you mean by that?

HUSTON SMITH: It means, that — here it is, we look at it, it comes at us whether we're ready for it or not — Ortega y Gasset said life confronts us point-blank, it doesn't ask, "Are you ready to be married? Are you ready to face suffering?" It just comes at us, and it's up to each one of us how we pattern this experience, and for some there is no meaning. I mean, it is randomness. For others, they see the experiences that don't quickly, clearly fit into a pattern, and yet, on balance, they think that there is

a - believe that - there is a pattern there which, as they come to understand its complexity, will become gradually and incrementally known to them.

But back to the same basic point, that's what I mean by life is religiously ambiguous. It does not tell us what we have to think about it. Now, for some, they regret that. They would like to have the answer given to them, but Kierkegaard is very good on this. He said, "That's what we think we want, but if we had it we would realize that's not what we really wanted, because if it told us the answer it would take our freedom away from us."

BILL MOYERS: If life told us the answer?

HUSTON SMITH: That's right. Then, we would be like puppets, and we would just passively accept the answer. So, the ambiguity of the world, religiously, dignifies us by forcing the choice, the decision, upon us.

BILL MOYERS: Well, it dignifies us in that sense. I can see that. But it also leaves us having to find our own answer, and for those who don't find the pattern, who don't find the meaning, who don't discover the purpose of it all, it can be a forlorn discovery.

HUSTON SMITH: And I think those people need — well, if I say our compassion, that patronizes them. They need our full respect because if we had experienced life in the way that they do, why, we would very likely be in the same position. But, on the other hand, I know people who have lived very creative, interesting lives, that would think, at least in explicit terms, that the religious quest was an illusion, and so I wouldn't say they haven't had very good lives, but I think on the average it is an enormous help, or it would not have existed. You know, those sociologists say that if an institution doesn't serve a function in society, it will drop away. And the fact that anthropologists have found no society without it just suggests that it's doing something right. And I think what it's doing right is what you just put your finger on — it provides mass and guidelines, which people perennially fall away from, don't live up to, but it sets a goal in the right direction.

HUSTON SMITH: Is it true that archaeologists have found no founding city of a civilization that doesn't have a sacred center?

HUSTON SMITH: There are pockets in modern, contemporary, Western civilization where the dominant mood is atheistic, but prior to the rise of modern secularization, modernism, in the traditional world, it's absolutely clear that every society, not only has a religion, but the anthropologists cannot sort out what is the religious compartment because it just pervades, pervades the whole.

BILL MOYERS: You make me think of a plant leaning toward the light—

HUSTON SMITH: Wonderful.

BILL MOYERS: —because the light is there, the light is real. What do you think a human life leans toward?

HUSTON SMITH: Well, in minimal terms, it leans towards something more — and transcendence could come in there — something that transcends anything we have mastered and experienced up to this point. There's a little piece of doggerel that I learned very early on, by Kipling. It's not great poetry, but it makes this point, I think, so vividly, I'll see if I can remember it. It's called *The Explorer*. "There is no sense in going further, so they said, and I believed them/Built my barns and strung my fences in that little border station/Tucked away among the foothills where the trails run out and stop/'Til a voice as bad as conscience/Rang interminable changes on one everlasting whisper/Night and day repeating, 'soul/Something hidden, go and find it/Go and look behind the ranges/Something lost behind the ranges/Lost and waiting for you/Go...'"

Well, I may have been 12 years old and yet I still remember that because whatever you think of it as poetry, it sounds the true note that there is something that lures us.

BILL MOYERS: I once heard you say that you were teaching your students about another world to live in.

HUSTON SMITH: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: Is this what you mean? This quest, this journey, this search for "more"?

HUSTON SMITH: Yeah, yeah. Oh, it is, and let me put it in a bit of context. My students, through their science courses, are also learning that there is another world. There is a quantum world, which is very strange and doesn't conform to our ordinary notions, and I won't take time to elaborate that. But they are taught, systematically, that there is a quantum world and a classical physicist world that underlies this experience that we have. But when it comes to our direct experience and the world of values and meanings and purposes, we have been so ravished by the scientific world view, which, with all its magnitude and size and space and power, unfortunately cannot deal with values, so cannot tell us about another world of values, that, alas, the assumption is that when it comes to value, meaning, or significance, our ordinary, mundane view of things is what there is.

Now, these great wisdom traditions that I have — and I'm so grateful — chosen to sleep myself in for my career — say the same thing, really, about this other world, but on a value dimension. The quantum physics will tell us about a world of size, which we could never have dreamed of if we had to rely on our ordinary senses. And it's awesome when we think about *luminintelligible* how fast light travels, how long a billion years is, and so on, but what the great wisdom say - They speak to the vertical dimension, which is the dimension of worth—

BILL MOYERS: Of worth?

HUSTON SMITH: Worth. Value, value and importance. And what they say is that that access is as much beyond our worldly, ordinary experience as the physical world of the cosmologist is beyond our sensory world. Science didn't have to struggle to free itself from religion when it—in the 16th, 17th century, and earn its own autonomy, which is quite right. But since then, now, with the burgeoning of our confidence in the scientific point of view which, by and large, in the modern West overshadows the confidence in the religious point of view, certainly on the campus. Now, there is a disciplinary rivalry between science and religion, and the university, grounded in science, is on that camp and they do not want to release their claims to having—being the pipeline to truth through their methods. So, there's a kind of built-in professional competition going on.

BILL MOYERS: And your understanding of religion, as you spent your whole life studying it and teaching it, is that it is another kind of truth. It is not a competitive truth or an alternative truth — it's another kind of truth.

HUSTON SMITH: That's a fair statement. In one sense, in the broadest sense, there is only one truth, and we have two windows on that. But the windows on to it are very different.

BILL MOYERS: The one truth is reality?

HUSTON SMITH: Yeah. Things just as they are.

BILL MOYERS: And science tells us the constituent nature of that reality, insofar as it is measurable, identifiable, weighable—

HUSTON SMITH: Quantifiable, in the end. And it should be honored, validated as the near-perfect way to understand nature, but we should add calculatively so that we

can use it, because the Taoists understood nature, too, but not calculatively. So, the scientific method is the near-perfect way to understand a region of reality, but as a probe to the whole, it has shown itself—It has taken us three centuries to see this, that the scientific method with all its power, is at the same time a radically limited instrument.

Now, again, a qualification — science does deal with the invisible insofar as it can be definitely proven from the visible. If you sprinkle iron files on a sheet of paper and put a magnet under it, the files will straighten up, in line — proof of magnetic fields. Magnetic fields are invisible, but we know they're there because we can strictly infer their existence from the visible. But anything invisible beyond that, that you cannot infer logically, conclusively, science can't deal with *[unintelligible]*

[cross-talk]
BILL MOYERS: But here's the difficulty. We can measure the truth of science, we can test the truth of science. We can measure the speed of light. But how do you test the truth of religion?

HUSTON SMITH: You cannot — not in the laboratory. You cannot test it in the way that delivers objective certainty in the way that the scientists can. To perform a laboratory experiment, the first thing you have to determine is what the relevant variables are. But we're talking about an intelligence that is greater than ours, as great — much greater — actually more — than our intelligence is greater than a dog's. Just as a dog would not know what would be the relevant item in terms of our mental framework, there's no way, since a superior intelligence lives in a wider world, that we're going to know what are the relevant variables, and so, in principle, it is impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God by the scientific method. Now, let's quickly add that the fact that we can't prove or disprove is no proof that it exists, but it is a knock-down proof that if God exists, there's no way that God is going to fit into a laboratory experiment. It would be like dogs getting together — "We've heard about mathematics, let's just see if mathematics exist. We'll submit it to the sniff test." It would be something like that.

BILL MOYERS: If by your own admission, you can't prove the truth of religion, what claim can you make about its plausibility?

HUSTON SMITH: The fact that all the enduring traditions make the same claim on this point, and the claim being that everything proceeds from an absolute perfection. Now, let me pause on that. You know, the Taoists, the Tao — there is a being, wondrous, perfect, how quiet it is, how mysterious it is, everything comes from it, but it does not ask to be recognized. I do not know its name, so I call it the Tao, and I rejoice in its power. One can go from that to India, where Brahman is infinite awareness, infinite bliss, and then all the way over to the Semitic tradition where the ultimate — call it Yahweh, God, Allah — is a perfect, perfect being in which all power and virtue unite. You know, that's a remarkable unity to have occurred, independently, to the human mind. And why are we still quoting them today? That view has lasted.

Now, my own personal view is, it is so at odds with our daily experience with its humdrum and dreary routine of obligations, and this sort of thing, that, well, it's almost like Saul Bellows says of Mozart's talent — "All we can say in the end is that it comes from somewhere else." The religious word for that is, this truth is revealed, and I so hold it to be. But now let me make a concession to modern thought. We can think about revelation as coming from outside — God tells people, plants it in people's minds — but we can also think of it as bubbling up, this insight, bubbling up from the

deepest unconscious of the spiritual geniuses of humankind. Now, in either case, it's a revelation. We've just switched our spatial image from coming from outside, or from coming from the inside, but when I say bubbling up from the deepest, in either case it's an incursion. It's an implosion into the conscious mind.

Now, I find that supporting evidence for the claim being true. But let's not deviate from what was said. There is no objective proof of this.

BILL MOYERS: I agree with you that all the religions entertain and are informed by this notion of a perfect source, a perfect being, but whereas Mozart's music arrived flawlessly, beautifully, as an act, a gift of God, Amadeus, the work of this creator, the religious creator, has not arrived perfectly in the world. It is a very imperfect consequence of a perfect source. Do you see what— This is why the religions are silent. They are affirmative and assertive on the question of being and source, but they're confused and discordant and uncertain and ambiguous themselves over the consequences of that being's creation, and over the connection between the perfection of the source and the imperfection of the consequence.

HUSTON SMITH: Well, I don't think they are confused. And I don't think they are ambiguous. But I think on the basic theme of why the world is imperfect, I think they're basically saying the same thing. They're saying that it has to be imperfect in order to allow, Bill, you and me, to be here because we're not perfect, and this perfect source, let's just say it had the option to keep being existence to itself, or to share being with other kinds of creatures. If it wanted to share its being, it had to create creatures that were not perfect. Now, you would probably agree with it, but does it— it has to go this far in imperfection? St. Augustine says, "I came to see that the greater was better than the lesser, but that the greater and the lesser, taken together, was greater than the greatest, alone."

But that's where we have to realize, Bill, that we have no view of the whole. Take the matter of, the analogy of our sight. How little we see? We see a few feet, a few yards, a few miles, with our telescopes, something more than that. But when you take the 15 billion light years, we have no experiential sense of that whole. Our experience— We have a hot spot of being of the things immediately around us that have to do with our welfare — how is it going in my career? How is it going in my personal relationships, and so on? And these are the hot spots of being that encompass, flood, almost the entire horizon. And those things that are far removed, if we are aware of them at all, it's with a kind of cold indifference. They just do not figure.

Now, what the wisdom traditions insist is that if we could understand and comprehend the whole, these what seem to us in our heart's hot spots of being as ultimate kind of irreducible tragedies, would be like learning experiences that a one-year-old child encounters that we understand are necessary for the growth of that child, but we see it in a very different perspective and light than the child does.

BILL MOYERS: Well, Augustine said that faith is essential for understanding, that if you start with disbelief you won't get it. And you've argued that, in order to understand one of these faith traditions, one of the wisdom traditions, it's essential to get inside it. But how do you get inside it without subscribing to the belief, and if you subscribe to the belief of every faith tradition, are you just a relativist?

HUSTON SMITH: That's a problem in any area of understanding. The Sufis have the saying that there are three ways to understand fire. The first way, you can hear about it — somebody tells you, "Hey, there is this something like fire, it leaps around." The second is to see fire, and the third is to be burned by fire.

BILL MOYERS: Have you been, as the Sufi Muslims put it, "burnt" by that fire?

