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Scholar denounces hijackers of religion

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NOTE: A UMC.org Audio Profile and photographs are available.

By Rich Peck*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) – Politicians, liberals and conservatives have hijacked Christianity and polarized Americans, according to Huston Smith, author of 14 best-selling books, including *The World's Religions*, which has sold 2.5 million copies in 12 languages.

In the week of the baseball playoffs, Smith lectured at Vanderbilt Divinity School. He pitched a slider at conservative Christians for being "trapped in a dogmatic literalism which isn't true but is held to dogmatically."

He tossed a curveball at liberals for being "unqualifiedly secular and having little to offer church members other than rallying cries to be good."

Smith saved his brush-back fastball for politicians. However, his anger at politicians who use religion to baptize war would frighten major leaguers.

"We live in a scary time," said Smith. "In war, both sides need strength and they want to win, so they call on God and assume they are doing God's will. At the same time, they demonize the enemy."

The 86-year-old United Methodist scholar has osteoporosis, which has ended his yoga practice. He walks in a heart-wrenchingly slow shuffle. His hearing loss is so severe that he has become skilled at reading lips.

A leading U.S. authority on religions, Smith notes that both sides in the war on terror distort the faith of their opponents. "Islam has been demonized as a fanatical religion spread by the sword, but just as Jesus is rightly known as the prince of peace, Islam's message of peace is equally emphatic."

Smith also blames the Taliban for distorting Islam into a religion of violence. He compares Jesus' eviction of the money changers from the temple with Mohammad's rebellion against polytheistic practices, drunken orgies and gaming in Mecca.

But Smith quotes Mohammad as saying the greatest jihad (exertion) should be against "the evil that is within us." Smith asserts that if Islam speaks of a jihad, it is the jihad against human nature in which we are all engaged. "How can you call authentic Islam a religion of violence?" he asks.

After a five-part series with Bill Moyers on public television, Smith

was described by Newsweek magazine as a "spiritual surfer." "That was a good headline, but it was wrong," said Smith, an active member of Trinity United Methodist Church in Berkeley, Calif. "Christianity has always been my meal. I only receive vitamins from other faiths."

Smith believes there is something to be learned from God seekers around the planet, but he opposes those who approach religion cafeteria-style, taking a little from each. "They take what they like," said Smith, "not what they need. If we all would take what we need, we would be at the end of our religious journey."

Asked how Christians can share their faith without disrespecting the faith of others, Smith recalls how his missionary father was part of the Student Christian Movement that pledged to "win the world to Christ in one generation."

"Times have changed, and the ecumenical movement is thriving," he noted. "Christians should exemplify their faith, and when asked about it, they should answer forthrightly, but we should not try to strong-arm others into our faith. That would be unchristian."

Smith was born in China, where his parents served as Methodist missionaries. His mother was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and his father belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which had split with the other church over slavery in 1844 but was reunited with it in 1939.

"When they got married, it was an indication that God had decided the North and South could get along together," he joked.

Asked why he has stayed a Methodist, Smith says he takes advice from the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist leader who has been a friend of his for 35 years. The Dalai Lama advises people to stay in the faith in which they are comfortable with the liturgy and traditions unless they have been bruised by it. "I've never been bruised," Smith said. "I've disagreed with some decisions, but I've never been bruised."

Smith has taught religion and philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, United Methodist-related Syracuse (N.Y.) University and the University of California at Berkeley. He holds 12 honorary degrees and has written 14 books, including his newest, *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*. His most famous volume, *The World's Religions*, originally published as the *Religions of Man*, has been used in religion classes around the world.

His film documentaries on Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism and Sufism have won international awards, and his 1996 public television specials won a Wilbur Award from the Religion Communicators Council.

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