

"The Initial Glimpse of Spirit"

Huston Smith was PARABOLA's first interview, for the issue on "The Hero" in 1976. Now, twenty-five years later, alive with ideas as ever, he tells Ken Lahriz about what light means in his new book, *Why Religion Matters* (HarperSanFrancisco).

KEN LAHRITZ: First of all, in your book you state that "light itself corresponds to consciousness itself." Could you explain this?

HUSTON SMITH: Let's use the analogy of a television screen. It would be black and we could see nothing on it if the background were not lit. The light is constantly there, but when we look at the screen we don't notice the light because it is always part of the picture. We notice all that is going on, the sitcoms, the sports events, all the images on the background of light. That is uncannily like the way consciousness functions in our subjective mind. It is the constant background—we notice



things because of contrasts and because consciousness is always there. It takes an act of deliberate intention to attend to its workings. Most of the time we are too involved, wrapped up in those images that appear on the background screen of our consciousness.

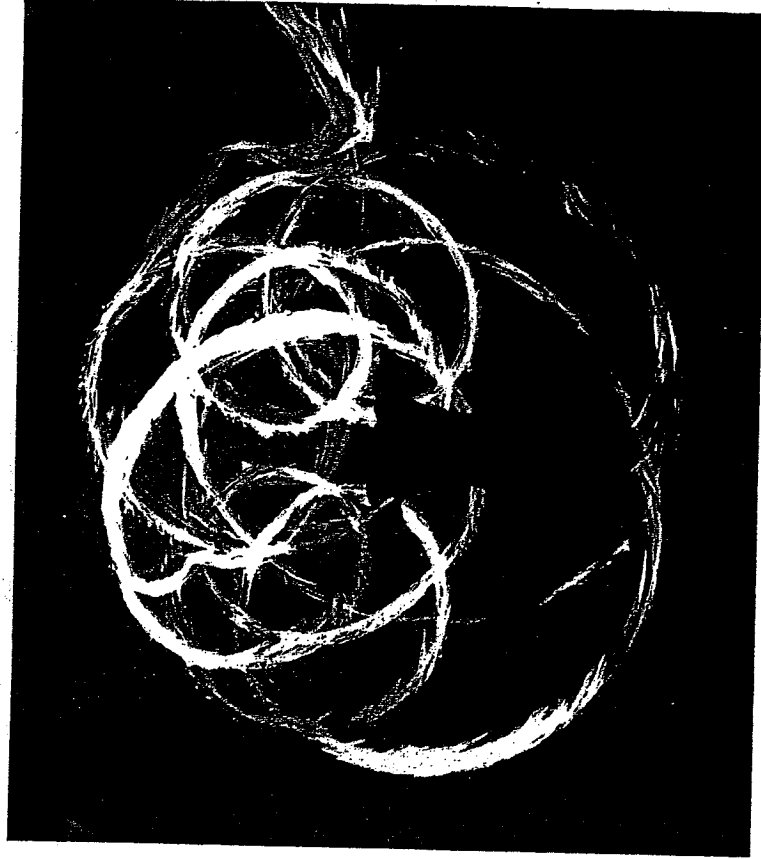
KL: So to move into an understanding of light, we would have to differentiate in some way between the contents—that which is projected from the light or projected into consciousness—and that which is the background or source.

HS: Exactly.

KL: You refer to light as the "very foundation of matter, the underlying processes of nature, spirit, and consciousness," and you quote Peter Russell's remark that "God is light." Could you speak more about this?

HS: One of the very exciting concepts of our time is what I call "frontier science" and its scenario on how this physical universe came into being. It appears to have begun with a substance that one really cannot call matter, because it did not behave in ways that fit into our understanding of matter. The matrices are space, time, and this something that fills them. Beginning with the vibrations of the original "Big Bang," the universe

comes into existence. Why did it happen this way? Why didn't those vibrations just stay as they were? Science does not speak to us of final causes because its work is with efficient causes—that is to say, identifiable, material events that explain more complicated events that follow. But if we posit that consciousness was the activating agent for the scenario that these scientists describe, then identity and continuity is built into our world view from the start.



Peter Angelo Simon

My take is that the human spirit has been shunted into a tunnel. It's a spin-off from Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the prisoners have been chained with their backs to the opening and the only world they know is the two-dimensional one of the procession of shadows on the wall in front of them.

KL: It's a fascinating point—that the vibration could have remained just a vibration and not transformed into what we think of as matter. You're saying that consciousness is what facilitated this movement.

HS: As Henry Stapp, a noted contemporary physicist, has put it, "Everything we now know in physics is in accord with the idea that the ultimate process of nature—meaning that which runs the whole show—is outside of space, time, and matter." That is an astounding statement, and it opens the door for a real partnership between science and religion, because the wisdom traditions have all said that God is outside of space, time, and nature, and in fact created those matrices. We have to be careful here, though, because people who are enthusiastic are over-quick to jump to the conclusion that therefore physics has proven God. No, all it has said is that there is an "X," a something, but it doesn't say what that is. But to say that there is something there leaves the door wide open for those who do believe in spirit to move in and say, "If we want an explanation, this is a very good candidate."

KL: You have brought particular energy and attention to the notion of light in your work. Where does light fit into this equation of that which is beyond space and time, where you imply that God resides?

HS: Light is a universal metaphor for consciousness. It is all over our vocabulary—for instance, we say "the light dawned" when we see a point. We are not talking about ocular light in this case, but it is the same word, which is part of the exciting way that the word "light" provides a bridge. In its highly technical, frontier-science usage, light is absolutely fundamental to the scientific explanation of nature. The same word,

universally and cross-culturally, is the word that we use for "understanding." This is a tremendous invitation to grasp the total nature of reality, and of our lives within it.

KL: It seems that in earlier, traditional times spiritual light was more present in human experience. What has happened in modern times that has obscured our spiritual vision?

HS: My take is that the human spirit has been shunted into a tunnel. It's a spin-off from Plato's allegory of the cave, in which the prisoners have been chained with their backs to the opening and the only world they know is the two-dimensional one of the procession of shadows on the wall in front of them. I want to say very clearly here that I do not put the blame for this on science or scientists. Looking back on the last three hundred years, we have not had the wit and the wisdom to distinguish science from what I call scientism. Science is the enterprise of studying the physical universe and the facts that it has uncovered—if we can handle the power it gives us and don't blow ourselves off the map, I will say science is an unqualified good. Scientism adds two corollaries to science: first, that the scientific method is the most reliable method of getting at truth, and second, that material things are the foundation of everything. Now, these two corollaries are not proven by any facts. They are at best philosophical assumptions and at worst a mere opinion. But that small slip between the cup and the lip has caused all of our spiritual problems today.

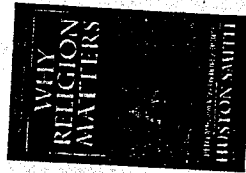
KL: But you write that you see a light at the end of the tunnel.

HS: There are hopeful signs. On the social scene, there is more concern for

justice and injustice than in the past. And on the conceptual front, the way that physics has been going indicates a suspicion—if not a conviction—that there is something more fundamental than this physical universe.

In modern science, we now understand the physical universe far better than our forebears did. It is noetically and conceptually breathtaking. I read as many books on science for the layman as I do on spiritual traditions, and I find them equally exciting, because after all,

it is one world and this is the way that spirit is working its way out in it. Now if only we can integrate that with the faith that there is something more fundamental than this physical universe, something more of a spiritual universe, and not make a world view of materialism or naturalism. If we can make the clear distinction between the physical universe and the whole of things where spirit comes into its own, then we will have the best of both worlds. □



IF CONSCIOUSNESS

is not simply an emergent property of life, as science assumes, but is instead the initial glimpse we have of Spirit, we ought to stop wasting

our time trying to explain how it derives from matter and turn our attention to consciousness itself. The image on a television screen provides an analogy for what we then find. The television lights up its screen, and the film in the video we are watching modifies that light so as to produce one of an infinite number of images. These images are like the perceptions, sensations, dreams, memories, thoughts, and feelings that we consciously experience—we might think of them as the contents of consciousness. The light itself, without which no images would be possible, corresponds to pure consciousness. We know that the images on the screen are composed of this light, but we are not usually aware of the light itself. Our attention is caught up in the images that appear

and the stories they tell. In much the same way, we know we are conscious, but normally we are aware only of the many different experiences, thoughts, and feelings that consciousness presents us with. Consciousness proper—with no images imposed upon it—is the common property of us all. When (in introspection or meditation) we detect pure consciousness, we have every reason to think that what I experience is identical with what you experience in that state. And identical with what God too experiences, not in degree but in kind. For at that level, we are down to what consciousness is, namely infinite potential—receptive to any content that might be imposed on it. The infinitude of our consciousness is only potential whereas God's consciousness is actual—God experiences every possibility timelessly—but the point here is that our consciousnesses themselves are in fact identical.

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