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From the Religions of Man to the World's Religions: A Conversation with Huston Smith

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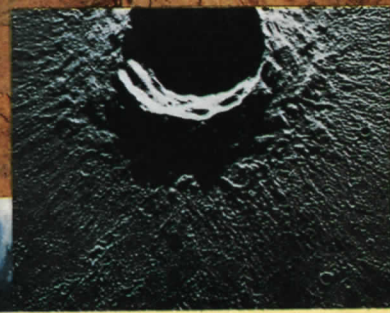
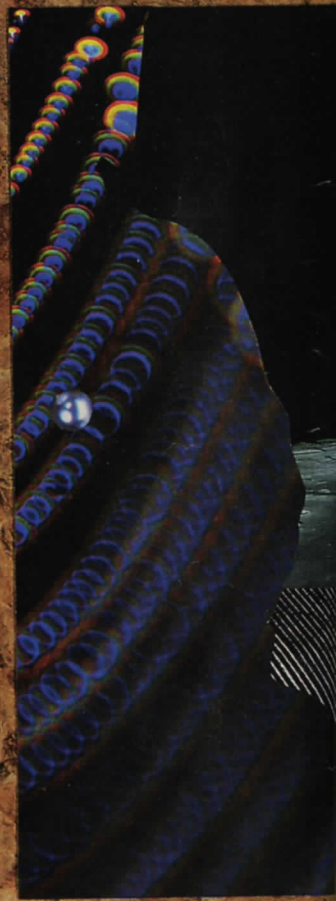
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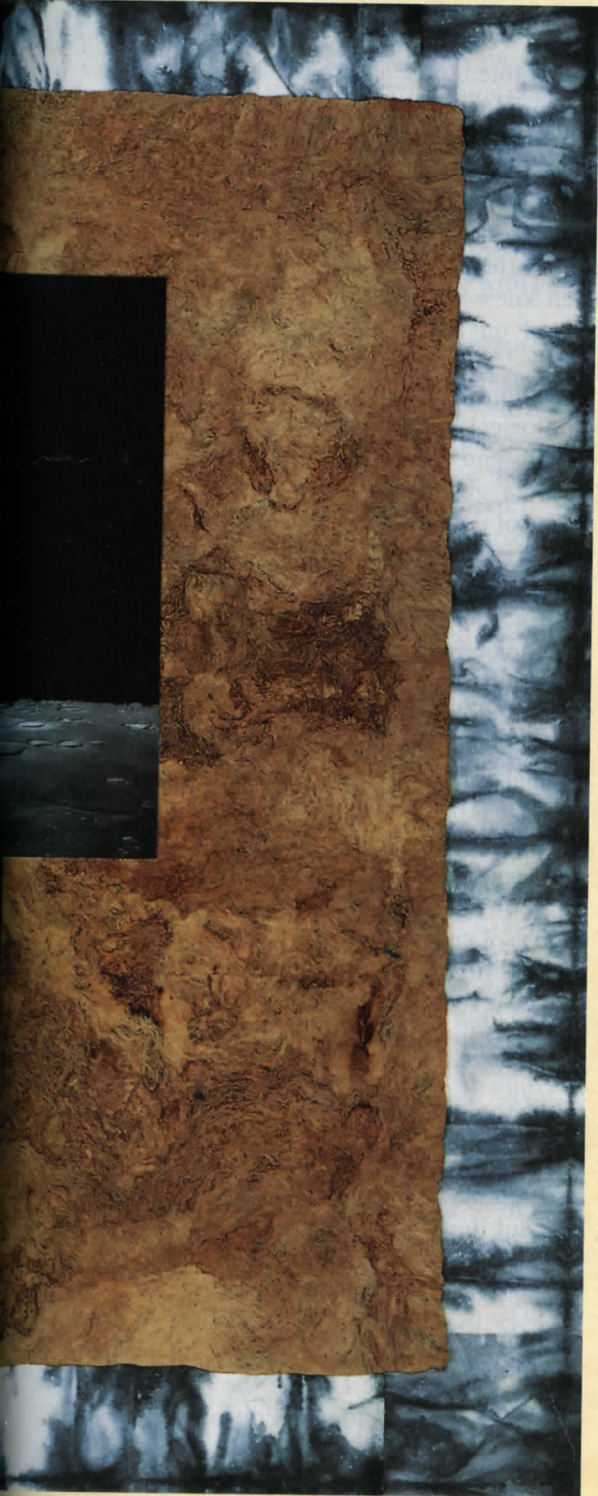
From *The Religions of Man*



to *The World's Religions*:

A CONVERSATION WITH HUSTON SMITH

Philip and Bridgett Novak



Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* has for a generation introduced more people to the world's spiritual heritage than any other work. Over one and a half million copies have been printed since 1958. The author of many other articles and books (*Forgotten Truth, Beyond the Postmodern Mind*) and an advocate of the Perennial Philosophy, Professor Smith has helped to shape the spiritual currents of our times. We interviewed him shortly after he had completed the first revised edition of *The Religions of Man*, due out in September from HarperCollins under the new title, *The World's Religions*. It seemed an appropriate time to query this wise teacher on the state of religion in the world today.

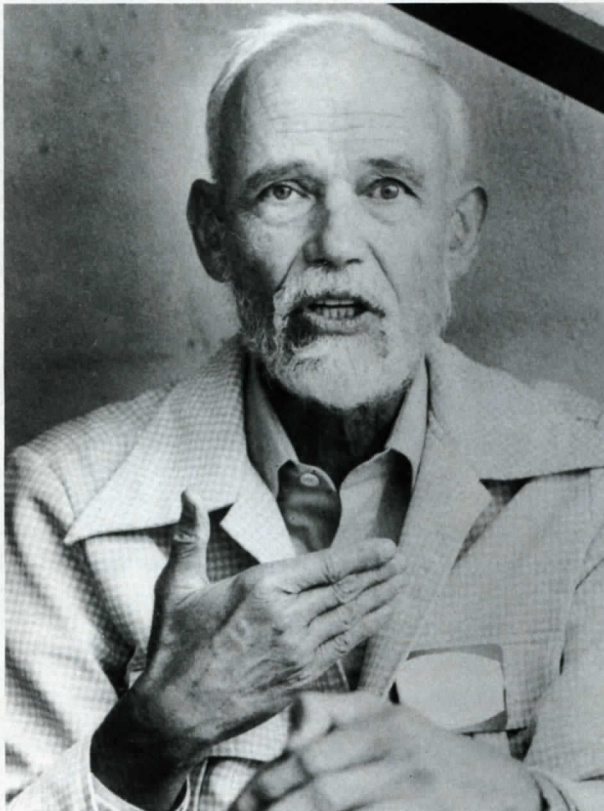
Philip Novak was a graduate student under Prof. Smith at Syracuse University for five years, and has been a professor of comparative philosophy and religion at Dominican College in San Rafael, California, for eleven years. He has published some two dozen articles in both scholarly and popular journals, including *The Quest*. **Bridgett Novak** is a freelance journalist.

"Luna Buddha,"

©1990 Donna Mitchell. Courtesy of LIGHT C.O.D.E.

Q: *The Religions of Man* has been the most successful world religions text of our times. Its insight and clarity have been widely praised. Yet, you wrote it at 37. How did you do it?

A: One wishes that one knew. It's the kind of question that teases out autobiography. If I was not born with a religious impulse, at least it got built in early in a Christian missionary family [in China]. I've always had a positive attitude toward the subject matter and a sense of its importance. In the beginning, that was entirely in the Christian mold. But as a young man, I met Gerald Heard, and through him Aldous Huxley. I absorbed their espousal of mystical traditions, which neither my under-



Huston Smith

graduate major in religion nor my graduate education in the philosophy of religion had paid the slightest attention to. Because the mystics tend to speak a universal language, I moved from Christianity—when I say moved, I don't mean abandoned, but extended—across religious lines to find in each new domain the same basic essential and existentially meaningful truths.

This process really began to snowball when I moved to my position at Washington University in Saint Louis. I was then about 28. I had been teaching for two years entirely in Western and philosophical material. In the late forties and early fifties, the big move in education was to globalize our universities: A directive came down from the dean that every subject outside the sciences should try to offer something of a non-Western nature. I was the young man on the totem pole and so the assignment came to me. Having met Heard and read Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*, I was eager for it. But I was also ignorant and needed help. Just before going to Saint Louis, I visited Heard. The last thing he said to me was, "There's a very good swami there." A swami? I don't know that I even knew what the word meant. The swami turned out to be Swami Satprakashananda of the Vedanta Society. Meeting him was a revelation. I instantly sensed, like a kind of ontological jolt, profundities that drew me in. Thus began a decade of apprenticeship in the Vedanta, giving me my first informed approach to one of the non-Western traditions. So, that's the nucleus. After that, it unfolded sequentially. For the first several years, the other non-Western traditions would be just materials out of textbooks. But then, successively, I was able to move into comparable existential encounters with each of the other major traditions.

Q: But those encounters came *after* the original writing of *The Religions of Man*.

A: That's true. Buddhism had come in just at the end. I went to Japan for Zen training in '57 and *The Religions of Man* came out in '58, so my account of Zen is informed by that. China, of course, was not wholly unknown to me. My first seventeen years were spent there, I knew a vernacular dialect and I felt a congeniality with aspects of the Chinese religious complex.

Q: You seem to be saying that you wrote *The Religions of Man* with a "beginner's mind." Fair enough. Its early success, too, might be attributable in part to a relatively virgin market. But thirty years later, amid a host of competitors, *The Religions of Man* is still going strong. I'm still fishing for the secret.

A: Something else does come to mind. The book emerged out of a television program. A few years before I wrote the book, what is now PBS [then National Educational Televi-

sion] was born. Educational television seemed like a good idea, but nobody knew what to do with it. And TV is ravenous, you know. You have to keep feeding it. So, they were looking for food. A couple of NET producers wanted to televise university courses. Washington University was one of the schools they approached. They conducted an informal popularity poll and my course surfaced. The dean let me off that semester and I taught via television. Out of a number of courses (from various universities) that were taught this way, two took off. One of them was mine; the other was a Shakespeare course at the University of Southern California. *The Religions of Man* attracted a very large audience in Saint Louis and, like the Shakespeare course, verged on competing with commercial stations.

I was blessed beyond words because my young producer was splendid. We were both University of Chicago graduates and were interested in ideas. Later he became a playwright, but at the time was working in television to make ends meet. He saw what was needed. He was very hard on me, which, of course, was why he was so good. Every evening, before we went on the air, he would come to our house or I would go to his apartment, and he would stand me up and have me do a dry run. I can still remember his withering comments along the lines of, "It doesn't sound too red hot to me," which meant: back to the drawing board. He would also just keep bearing in on me, saying, "With this medium, if you lose them for twenty seconds, they switch the knob, and you don't get them back." He was pounding on me to sprinkle my talks with concrete examples and they found their way into the book. So, one answer to why other texts might not have taken off the way mine did is: they didn't have Mayo Simon put them through that regimen! Of course, one has to be interested and involved and studious, but a lot of people have those virtues. However, nobody else had Mayo Simon. That's at least part of the answer.

Q: So, why have you decided to offer a revised edition—now called *The World's Religions*—after some thirty-three years?

A: Several factors contributed. Within the discipline of world religions, new information had been coming to light every year and it was adding up. And some glaring holes in the original began to appear. The first of these was

Tibetan Buddhism. I have since been chagrined that the term doesn't even appear in the index to the first edition. A total blank. I had once approached John Blofeld to pick his brain on Zen (I thought his translations of *The Zen Teachings of Huang Po and Hui Hai* were brilliant) only to find that his personal teachers were Tibetan. I resolved on the spot to learn more about that tradition and that led to a considerable association with the Tibetans. Later, on a trip around the world, I came upon the Sufis. Again, "Sufism" is a word that's not even in the original index. Then, when I moved to Syracuse University in 1973, I found myself five miles from the Onondaga reservation and Native American traditions. There, too, I discovered something that just wasn't in my horizons when *The Religions of Man* was written. I remember thinking to myself: "You have been circling the globe for the spiritual traditions of the world and here's one right under your feet that you just haven't given the time of day to." So, these three holes needed to be plugged.

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It was actually the gender issue, ticking away like a time bomb, that finally transformed intention into action.

formed intention into action. The gender issue had gotten more and more painful every year until at American Academy of Religion meetings I would almost start hiding from certain faces. It was actually in late 1989, at the meeting in Anaheim, when I realized I could wait no longer. So, I searched out John Loudon (my HarperCollins editor) and said, okay, let's go.

Q: Can you give us a glimpse of the other substantive changes that occur in this new edition?

A: First, I want to say that thirty years of working with these ideas have caused them to be handled at a deeper level this time; the new edition is a more reflective book. I can best tick off the other substantive changes by doing a brief sequential rundown.

Hinduism is the chapter that is least changed; indeed it contains no substantive changes at all. Buddhism has the aforemen-

Personally, I find depth in New Age movements only to the degree that they tap into great historical traditions.

tioned Tibetan addition. After probing devoted, living Confucianists about their way of life, I have added a section to Confucianism that describes how one would live one's life if one were trying to steer it by Confucian principles. The Taoism chapter is the most changed. Certain of my thoughtful Taoist friends had never been happy with the way I handled popular and mystical Taoism. Re-immersing myself in the whole issue, I was quite thrilled to bring forth from the bewildering mass of phenomena that crowd under the Taoist umbrella an original typology. Using *ch'i* [spiritual energy] to designate the Tao as it courses through human beings, I propose that philosophical Taoism aims at efficient, effective deployment of our *ch'i*, primarily by spending in the mode of *wu wei*. Energizing Taoism—a term that covers the Taoisms that work with nutrition, yogic exercises, and meditation—seeks for its part to increase the supply of *ch'i*, while popular/religious Taoism aspires to vicarious *ch'i*, a *ch'i* whose power can be made available to others. I'm happy with this typology; it feels as if it cuts where the joints are. Besides the obvious change with the addition of Sufism, the Islam chapter as a whole is the one in which the deepening, seasoning process that the entire book has undergone is most evident. The reason is that Islam is the religion about which I have learned most during the interval. The Judaism chapter now has a section on Messianism which I had inexplicably overlooked in the first edition. The Christianity chapter has an added section on the historical Jesus. Finally, the chapter on Primal Religions is completely new. It is short and does not attempt to do those many traditions full justice but it does acknowledge their existence and salutes them. In addition, it does something that nothing else in the literature that I was able to find attempts. It tries in short compass to indicate how religion, as expressed in an oral, tribal mode, differs from religion in its historical text-oriented genres.

Q: What of the traditions *not* addressed? I mean such traditions as Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Jainism, Shinto, the Latter Day Saints, etc. What is your rationale for exclusion?

A: I do have an appendix (to the Hinduism chapter) on Sikhism now. As for the others, it comes down to my decision not to introduce a religion unless I could stay with it long enough to convey its flavor, and beyond that, the meaning that it has for its adherents. That takes space, and I didn't want to turn the book into a tome. It's a focused book, specific in terms of its aim and its audience. No volume of whatever length could present them all; I didn't want to make the book a catalog. One does have to select. Two criteria that I use are: first, the numbers of human beings a religion has included over the centuries; and second, its prominence in the world today. Thus, the Tibetan tradition, though small in numbers, has jumped to world importance. People know about it and are interested in finding out about it. One could say the same thing about Judaism. It is small in numbers, yet in terms of world impact—its influence on the other traditions and on world politics today—it is important. I do feel apologetic, personally and emotionally, most to the Shinto tradition because that's the Japanese miracle, and aspects of it—its affinity with nature and its simplicity—are very compelling. In regard to this and other worthy traditions, in the end, one just has to apologize.

Q: I've heard you say that 30 years ago you sensed the unity of religions but didn't have a fully satisfying theory of their unity-in-diversity. Since then, you've been deeply impressed by the writings of the Swiss seer Frithjof Schuon and his various articulations of the "transcendent unity of religions." Has this clearer philosophical grasp of religions' unity-in-diversity played a role in the revised edition?

A: Not explicitly. Even back then, Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* had given me a kind of loose, working definition of the unity: there is an absolute; the relative world is conditioned by it; human life should be vectored toward it. These near-truisms define the position and they have proved sufficient for the revised edition. I have re-worked the last chapter to articulate some of the commonalities in a way I don't do in the first book. Indeed, this is a new note. The

book's new epigraphs are also telling. One of them is from E. F. Schumacher, who says, "We need to have the intelligence and courage to listen to the world's wisdom traditions." I have come to love that phrase: "the wisdom traditions." It has certain advantages over the word "religion," which designates the institutional aspects which are always a mixed bag. That phrase was operative in my mind in the revision, and I present the religions more explicitly as wisdom traditions than I did previously. That phrase was operative in my mind in the revision, and I present the religions more explicitly as wisdom traditions than I did previously. That rather than Schuon's more technical and abstruse schema has been the noticeable influence.

Q: In a book called *The Fragile Universe*, philosopher of religion Patrick Burke observes that "the great traditions are everywhere in decline." Though there are pockets where this generalization does not hold, for example in certain fundamentalist Islamic and Christian sectors, do you feel it is generally true that the great traditions are evaporating? If so, where are we headed? If not, why not?

A: When it comes to taking the pulse of our time, let alone trying to divine the future, my mind gets no traction. I don't trust myself, but I will say something. I personally believe that we are *homo religiosus*, religious creatures, meaning that the spirit is an ineradicable part of our makeup and, like a jack-in-the-box, it will always seek expression. But what form will it take? What channels will it flow in? I vacillate in my sense of the future of the great traditions. They have certainly been severely wounded by three centuries of triumphant modernity. But modernity itself is now facing serious problems, and that at least puts us into a different ball game. If modernity is called into question, then what truly speaks for the human race? Personally, I do not see an outlook, an ethos, that is more profound than the wisdom component of these traditions. One could ride the momentum of that thought and say that there might well be a resurgence of interest, even confidence, in that component. A science writer in the *New York Review of Books*, not a pious journal, recently reported his sense of a revival of theism among intellectuals. But even if such a resurgence of religion were to occur, it might occur outside traditional institutional channels. Cer-



Huston Smith and the Dalai Lama, April 1991

tainly the difficulties facing the traditions are enormous. I guess that's about where I'm left with the matter.

Q: I have a couple of other questions about that tractionless realm of the future. The great religions may be in decline, but Walt Anderson tells us that "we seem to be in a world with more religion than there has ever been before. Beneath the rational surface of our more or less secular realism lurks a seething cauldron of faiths of all descriptions." How do you see the New Age proliferation of spiritualities? Are they distortions of the great traditions which alone are the privileged disclosers of the sacred or are they hopeful signs of what Willis Harman calls "distributive revelation," a kind of religious democratization in which a thousand spiritual flowers bloom to our betterment?

A: Walt Anderson has a fine eye for this kind of thing. Part of my conviction that we are *homo religiosus* is that if the formative power of traditions has been played out, the spirit will seek outlet elsewhere, which it manifestly is doing. Personally, I find depth in these New Age movements only to the degree that they tap into or flow from the great historical traditions. That's just the way it looks to me. When the traditions erupted and entered into history, they did so with a certain congruence with the minds of the public that these new movements, with all their sometimes dazzling

effects, do not seem to have. They do not strike the hearts of multitudes in the way that the great traditions in their formative periods did. Let me add, too, that I am a *jnana yogi* [*jnana yoga* is the yoga of knowledge] and, therefore, the gnostic depth of long-developed traditions makes a great difference to me. I see it as very important. Many of these new movements seem to me to be riding "experience," a magic word these days. For me, experiences come and go. One day my experience of the world is rose colored, the next dismal gray. It's like ice packs floating on the sea. The mind is capable of more stability than that. It can remember and remain constant through the ups and downs of experiences. And the limitlessly deep cognitive contours of the great traditions give the mind what it needs. They have included towering intellects, spoken to multitudes over millennia, and in the process a winnowing and seasoning has occurred.

*For me, experiences come and go.
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rose colored, the next dismal gray.*

Q: So, on the one hand, the spirit will blow where it wants, but on the other, if we lose these traditional structures or if they peter out into "distributive revelation," some very important structural shapings of the spirit will be lost?

A: That puts it very well, yes. Another of my four epigraphs on the flyleaf of this book is by Robert Bellah. Recently Bellah said: "In 1976, I was writing about a post-traditional world. Now, I believe that if we lose our traditions we will have no world at all." I confess I agree. From all our available spiritual resources, the great traditions continue to impress me as the most promising. Not that we have to perpetuate them blindly, but fathoming their wisdom still strikes me as our best hope.

Q: In a similar vein, Huston, what of the oft-dreamed dream of a new world religion, one that gets rid of all the pre-modern cultural baggage of the existing traditions and makes

the sacred newly available to earth-beings of the postmodern global order? Could there ever be such a universal religion, if not in the near future, even in the distant one?

A: Well, one can never issue prohibitions when speaking of the spirit. It's bigger than we are. So, logically, it can happen. But there are reasons to think that it won't. To begin with a banal yet important one, we have to realize that when we're talking about religions, we're talking about very human institutions despite their divine infusions. Now, there are some people who just want to be at the head of whatever group they're in. They would rather be first in a store-front church than second in command to the Pope. This fact of human nature just has to be reckoned with. This means that if we got a single world religion today, we would, very likely, have two tomorrow. That's one problem. And then there's the question, is bigger necessarily better? When I look to my own background, I see Protestantism in shambles and splinters and yet maybe these differences have providently given a little play for different facets of the human spirit. One must also be aware of the degree to which our age, an age of gigantism in education—the mega-versity and so on—feeds this single-religion fantasy. To my way of thinking, religious unity dwells in the Absolute, in God Itself, and will not be found among the multiple and relative, *i.e.* where we live. It may be a mistake to look for more unity than human existence allows on either the individual or communal level. And yet, of course, the longing is natural and appropriate too.

Q: The geologist Thomas Berry, a sensitive student of the religious traditions, has nevertheless argued that all of them, even the so-called historical traditions of the West, were born out of a predominantly spatial conception of reality in which time was mistakenly seen as an ultimately unreal reflection of the eternal. Now that evolutionary thought has revealed a universe that is time-developmental down to its roots, the argument goes, none of the old traditions is fully adequate to describe the Real in its Creative Advance. Nor do they have sufficient resources to respond to our ecological/spiritual predicament. So comes the call, once again, for new wisdom traditions since the old ones were hatched within an outmoded form of consciousness. Your response?

A: I don't resonate. The world is in a mess, but perhaps it always was. It's a bit like the craving for unity we were speaking of. We can say we want something different. But, until we specify *what* we want different, it's just a vacuous gesture. What is the claim? Do we want time-consciousness? Even the Australian Aborigines knew that there was time, but they also had an urge for the timeless. Do we want to absolutize time? All right, then we have to assess the plausibility and possible advantages of doing this. My own feeling is that we live between the poles of time and eternity. Both must figure in the picture. If the move is to eliminate eternity, again, I'm not sure it can be done and I don't see what's gained by the move. I understand the feeling that things are terrible and that we've got to do something different. But, again, until we say exactly what it is that will be better than what we've got, we're merely riding a human frustration, and that's thin ice.

Q: Some have glimpsed a silver lining in the ecological cloud, suggesting that newly awakened concern for the earth and identification with an earth community might provide an "immanent unity" of religions or at least help erode intercultural and interreligious antagonisms. How do you see it?

A: The way I've said it to myself is to go back to William James' essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War." James argues that war can bring out the goods of patriotism and idealism and that war can inspire the individual to heroism and putting the group's concerns above his/her own. But, it's so destructive. So, we need a moral equivalent of war. Our environmental predicament could be that equivalent. That predicament *is* new in human history. I guess I am just affirming the tenor of your question here, namely that our environmental crisis may be the catalyst that could draw peoples together.

Q: Do you harbor any hope that the linkage between religion and violence can be broken?

A: First of all, my persuasion is that what really breeds violence is political differences. But, because religion serves as the soul of community, it gets drawn into the fracas and turns up the heat. I remember being asked to speak to a political science class during the Iran hostage crisis. I never have gone to a lecture

with such dragging feet, because I knew they wanted me to describe the religious differences and to say that if they were resolved the political problems would be resolved, too. But that's not the way it works. That's a confusion of cause and effect. Still, politics and the spirit are too intimately linked to be placed in water-tight compartments.

Q: In your considerable writings on the religious traditions, spanning some forty years, you seem to shy away from one aspect of religion where differences are most apparent, and that is what happens after death. All religions seem to speak to the issue, but you seem reluctant to do so. Why?

A: Because it's a mystery; respecting human beings, the ultimate mystery. I do have some opinion on the subject, though. The differences among the religions that you refer to are real, but they all pretty much agree that something in the human self survives bodily death. I don't mean material components like atoms or minerals, but something that is continuous with our awareness. I accept that surmise. Where the religions differ is on what that "something" is, and where (in their respective symbolic cosmologies) they locate it. The Hindu/Tibetan doctrine of reincarnation has the human spirit returning to this world to continue its odyssey in another body, usually a human one. Other religions have the soul (or its counterpart) passing through purgatories or intermediate realms of other sorts. Given the immensity of our ignorance on this subject, I find the variety in these subsidiary depictions neither surprising nor disconcerting. Underlying virtually all of them is the thought that with rare exceptions the human enterprise isn't completed in this life span; further work with its attendant ordeals is required before we reach our final destination. If any religion unequivocally held that some souls are destined for eternal damnation, that would be a position one couldn't equivocate on. But even Christianity (which comes closest to the view) includes alternative interpretations which have the fires of hell exhausting themselves eventually. Siding with that reading of the matter, I find a commonality in the world's religions, even in their teaching on the afterlife, as long as we stick to the essential. ■