

BOOK REVIEWS

SCHOLAR LOOKS AT CHRISTIANITY AND ITS ISSUES

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

REVIEW

Since 1958, when he published *The World's Religions*, Huston Smith has been America's favorite religion professor, patiently and provocatively educating a nation about what the rest of the world believes. At age 86, he turns his scholar's eye on his own faith, Christianity.

The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition manages to balance a concise explanation of the tenets of the faith with a sound rendering of current problems -- in fewer than 200 pages -- yet still sound a hopeful note. That's not to say the reader doesn't have to work to make it through the book.

Part One, "The Christian Worldview," becomes dense quickly. Smith admits as much at the section's end. If, like me, you don't have a philosophy background, you might get bogged down. Jump to Parts Two and Three, then back to One. I found it easier on the reread, and it is worth reading as Smith lays out 15 points that form the worldview of the faith.

Point 1 is short and sweet: God is infinite. Point 2 elaborates, noting that this Infinite must be experienced, not just affirmed. From there, Smith brings science, the problem of evil, the nature of revelation, the ways we know God and the technical language of religion (i.e., myth, metaphor, figures of speech, parables and story, not literalism) into an informative and complicated discussion.

In Part Two, the book comes alive outlining the Christian story, beginning with Jesus' life and teachings. Smith makes real the concept of God's love as he explains not how but why Jesus' ignoble death could transform his followers. His explanation offers a transforming take on the 13th chapter of First

* *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*, by Huston Smith (Harper San Francisco, \$22.95)

* *How Can I Let Go If I Don't Know I'm Holding On? Setting Our Souls Free*, by Linda Douty (Morehouse, \$15.95).

Corinthians, the famous love chapter read at weddings. Paul's description of Christian love, he writes, "ought not be read as if he were describing a quality that was already known. His words list the attributes of a specific person, Jesus Christ. In phrases of unparalleled beauty, (the passage) describes the divine love that Paul believed Christians would reflect toward others once they experienced Christ's love for them."

Smith closes the book with a description of the beliefs and differences of the three major branches of Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism. He ends with a personal note about what influenced him as he wrote the book. By then, you're sure to have picked up some of Smith's own excitement about his faith.

Freeing oneself

Spiritual director Linda Douty's inspiring first book takes the concept of "letting go" off of bumper stickers -- thank you! -- and gives it flesh and bones. With a generous mix of personal experiences of loss and divorce, others' stories, sound theology and wise psychology, she outlines why we need to let go, what we need to let go and how.

"We usually think of loss and gain in terms of the tangible: persons when they die or leave, places when we must relocate, or things when we attempt to simplify our lives. But the layers of letting go are much more pervasive than that. We're engulfed in a myriad of intangibles that need releasing," she writes. "What about our attachment to being right, our illusion that the world should be fair, our unspoken requirement that everyone agree with us? Unless we learn the art of these necessary goodbyes and hellos, we risk remaining stuck in patterns that retard our growth and make us miserable."

Letting go is hard work, but it's the only way through. As Douty explains so well, "No matter how fervently we pray, God will not arbitrarily take away that which we refuse to release."

The steps could be covered quickly in one page: First, become aware that something has to change. Second, name what keeps us from making a change. It might be a person, a comfortable mask we wear (martyr or victim, anyone?), a role we play that isn't really us, a wrong notion about God, a demand we make only of ourselves (I must be perfect). Third, be available to new wisdom and act responsibly when we get it. Fourth, allow the healing process to begin. Fifth, accept the realities of life as they are.

Spend a few pages with Douty, though, and you're glad she didn't write that briefly. She layers her book with stories to remember, with insights that are real and, most important, with constant encouragement to get on with letting go but be gentle with yourself while doing it. An example: "The spiritual life is sometimes pictured as a large house with many windows, surrounded by Light. It may be dark inside, but we manage to function. However, if we'll just open a

window, the Light will pour in and illuminate everything in the house."

When discussing the need to let go of plans, if-onyms and what-ifs, she offers this conversation written by Helen Mallicoat: " 'My name is I Am.' He paused. I waited. He continued, 'When you live in the past, with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I Was. When you live in the future, with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I Will Be. When you live in this moment, it is not hard. I am here. My name is I Am.' "

Douty's chapters on how to let go are filled with updated suggestions for classic Christian spiritual practices, including contemplative prayer, journaling, labyrinth walking, forgiveness and gratitude. She also adds others, including gardening and knitting, and detailed how-tos for those who have problems with the classics.

She ends with a list of signs of successful letting go -- less worry, less striving, more acceptance of self and others, more simplicity -- that makes one eager to get on with letting go. Go for it, knowing that when you get bogged down, you can reach for the book and find a loving, prodding spiritual director ready to help.

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PHOTO

(Book jackets)

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