



The Quarterly JOURNAL

The Newsletter Publication of Personal Freedom Outreach

VOL. 17, NO. 1

JANUARY-MARCH 1997

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The Secret of a Christian Classic

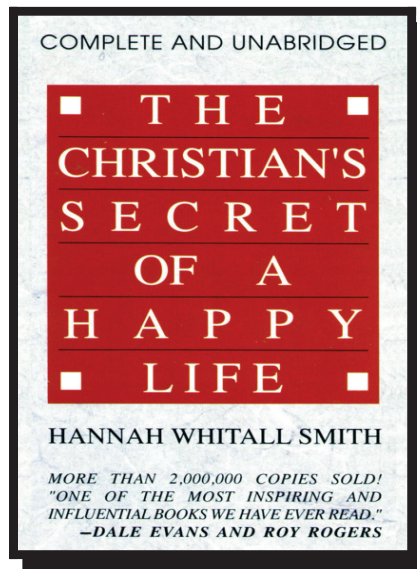
The Unhappy Life of Hannah Whitall Smith

by G. Richard Fisher

The saying, *There is often little truth in advertising*, is frequently as true in the realm of Christian publishing as it is anywhere else. Often, little truth is found in the titles and themes of books in Christian bookstores.

And lest one think this phenomenon is confined to modern works, consider the "classic" *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* by Hannah Whitall Smith, a book that overpromises and underdelivers and still sells well despite its 1875 publication date.

After reading the book a Christian should have difficulty understanding why Smith's publication enjoys the reputation it does. Perhaps many never get past the



title, which appeals to the modern search for self-fulfillment

and experience.

The book presents a sort of passive mysticism. In one chapter it cites Deuteronomy 32:11-12 and says that this verse teaches a kind of surrender to God with no need on the believer's part to act. Smith also teaches a truncated version of sanctification. She says that one of the eagle's wings is trust and the other surrender, and goes on to quote Isaiah 40:31, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength," without finishing the passage: "they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." The entire verse shows that while waiting on God is important, so is walking with Him.

A biography of Smith points out that she herself never lived the happy life she wrote about. Marie Henry's *The Secret Life of Hannah Whitall Smith* takes the reader behind the scenes and, in an honest fashion that doesn't set

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decades has continued to print Guyon's volume. Even if publishers would want to issue books like this for historical purposes, there should be loud disclaimers in the Preface for the sake of the untaught and the novice.

Guyon's beliefs do not even come close to biblical Christianity. What she proposes is sheer essence mysticism and Catholicism mutated into even more horrible errors. That man could become like God was one of the first lies held out by Satan to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). That Moody Press would continue to propagate this lie is beyond comprehension.

Endnotes:

1. Madam Guyon, *Madame Guyon An Autobiography*. Chicago: Moody Press, no date, pg. 6.
2. Elgin S. Moyer, *Who Was Who In Church History*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1962, pg. 182.
3. Henry Sheldon, *Pantheistic Dilemmas*. New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1920, pg. 224.
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 220

5. See further, *Mysticism An Evangelical Option?* by Winfried Corduan, pp. 34-35 and *Dictionary of Christianity in America* by Daniel G. Reid, Coordinating Editor, pg. 968.
6. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 14.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 37.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64, 89-99.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 72.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
13. *The Ryrie Study Bible*, study note on Luke 17:21, pg. 1580.
14. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 73.
15. *Ibid.*, pg. 76.
16. *Ibid.*, pg. 77.
17. *Ibid.*, pg. 80.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-88.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 140-147.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-159.
22. *Ibid.*, pg. 201.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 162.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 219-224.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 231.
26. *Ibid.*, pg. 232.
27. Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973, pg. 386.
28. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 234.
29. *Ibid.*, pg. 239.

30. See further, "Ye Are Gods? Orthodox and Heretical Views on the Deification Of Man," by Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Christian Research Journal*, Winter/Spring 1987.
31. See further, *The Love of Power or the Power Of Love*, by Tom Smail, Andrew Walker and Nigel Wright, pp. 88-89 and Corduan, op.cit., pp. 98-102.
32. *The New Geneva Study Bible*, study note on 2 Peter 1:4, pg. 1980.
33. *Guyon*, op. cit., pp. 243-244.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284, 289.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 286-287.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 299-301.
37. *Ibid.*, pg. 281.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 321-322.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 324.
40. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*. New York: Image Books-Doubleday, 1990, pg. 295.
41. *Guyon*, op. cit., pg. 310.
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 336.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 353-357.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 357, 364.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 371.
46. *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985, pg. 498.
47. Everett F. Harrison, Editor-in-chief, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987, pp. 367-368.



Hannah Whitall Smith

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out to be unflattering, exposes a Hannah Whitall Smith who was as flawed as anyone. Henry's interesting and readable book makes Hannah Whitall Smith's life a secret no longer.

Henry became interested in Smith and her writings after suffering a "partial breakdown" after serving as a pastor in a Presbyterian church. She compiled her account of Smith's life with the help of surviving family members, diaries, letters and personal papers. Her material contained a large amount of primary sources.

Henry says early in her book's

Introduction that Smith's life was far from perfect:

"The truth is that this writer of the best-selling Christian classic *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* had some agonizing experiences with members of her family and went through periods of great discouragement, doubt and even despair" (pg. xiv).

According to Henry's biography, Hannah Whitall Smith was born (1832), reared and married (1851) in Germantown, Pa. She struggled with spiritual doubt and confusion during the early years of her marriage. A confirmed mystic, Smith experienced what she called "openings," a term she

used for her inner "revelations," many of which were unorthodox.

While on vacation in Atlantic City, N.J., in 1858, Smith reported that a "healing, comforting peace warmed her whole being" while she read her Bible (Henry, pg. 32). Giving attention to Romans 5, she said she came to a saving knowledge of Christ and an experience of salvation by grace. After resigning from the Quaker assembly in order to be baptized by immersion, she came under intense persecution from her family (Henry pp. 34-39).

She and her husband Robert then joined the Plymouth Brethren. Hannah Smith began to doubt the concept of hell and

eternal punishment and ultimately, through an “inward voice,” became convinced that all mankind would be saved. She became convinced that all sinners ultimately would confess Christ as Lord (Henry, pp. 41-42). This departure from Scripture into Universalism or Restitutionism arose from her belief that God was too loving to punish sin.

Universalism is a heresy with both pagan and Christian forms. One variation teaches that hell is ultimately restorative. (See further, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 539-540.) None of the universalistic theories is based on Scripture but rather a sentimental view of the love of God that makes the Atonement all-inclusive. Faulty logic and disregard for scriptural teachings on hell is Universalism's foundation.

The *New 20th Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* details how the Church, from the earliest times, condemned Universalism as heretical:

“**Universalism.** A theology which holds that in the fullness of time all souls will be released from the penalties of sin and be restored to God. Technically known as *apokatastasis pantōs* (‘restoration of all’), universalism denies the doctrine of eternal punishment.... Augustine of Hippo (354-430) strongly opposed universal salvation and the theology of Origen was eventually declared heretical at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 534” (pg. 849).

Universalism all but disappeared until it was resurrected in Massachusetts in the late 1700s. Most likely Smith got her ideas from the Universalist churches that thrived in and around Phila-

delphia in her day.

The Smiths eventually moved to Millville, N.J., where they were exposed to the “second blessing” teaching, (Henry, pp. 49-50). Forms of a “higher-level” Christianity were being fostered by a group called the Keswick movement and often were referred to as the “higher life.”

At a camp meeting in Pennsylvania, husband Robert was “shaken with what seemed like a magnetic thrill of heavenly delight.” For about a year Hannah Smith sought the “baptism” which she felt would be accompanied by “sobs” and “thrills,” but nothing came.

Praying one night in June 1869, without any outward physical signs, she received what she called a “weak consciousness of God's presence” (Henry, pg. 53). She concluded shortly after, that both her experience and Robert's were emotional and not solid. Smith sought the Spirit's baptism again in 1876 and 1877 (Henry, pg. 86). Her letters between 1876 and 1878 express such anxiety, doubt and confusion. She might be classed as manic-depressive (Henry, pp. 87-88).

After the death of their 18-year-old son (Henry, pp. 56-57), the Smiths returned to Philadelphia where Robert suffered a “nervous breakdown.” He was confined to a sanatorium and came under the influence of a Dr. Foster, who shared strange ideas about the interweaving of sexual and spiritual feelings (Henry, pg. 61). This, along with Hannah's self-imposed sexual abstinence, brought severe strains on the marriage that continued until Robert died in 1898.

Despite their unhappiness and eroding marriage, Hannah and

Robert quickly became famous teachers of “holiness” and “sanctification.” Hannah's book, written years before, was beginning to transform the couple into religious heroes. (Smith later confessed that *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* was written under pressure from Robert and only to oblige him.)

The Smiths eventually returned to the Quakers. Robert became a famous preacher across Europe, a leading light in the “higher life movement.” Many criticized the fact that he always traveled without his wife. Henry writes that he fell into moral scandal and that there is evidence of repeated episodes of adultery. Hannah remained unhappily married and her letters reveal her continuing misery (Henry, pp. 64-65). However, in those days appearances prevailed and divorce was not an option.

Rumors of heresy and another nervous breakdown eventually scuttled Robert's career. (See further, *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, pp. 1098-1099.) Henry says he deteriorated into a self-indulgent hypochondriac (Henry, pg. 103).

The Smiths' children fared little better spiritually. Of Hannah's three surviving offspring (four had died), the eldest daughter carried on an extramarital affair, having abandoned her Roman Catholic husband and children. Hannah suffered untold agony intervening between her son-in-law and the abusive governess he placed over her grandchildren (Henry, pp. 136-138). Another daughter married atheist Bertrand Russell and that marriage ended in separation. Her son did not embrace Christ or Christianity.

Right up to her death in 1911, Smith was a religious celebrity,


with admirers kneeling before her wheelchair and getting letters from those who said they slept with her books beneath their pillows (Henry, pg. 164).

In the end, Smith did not believe her own perfectionistic ideas and was skeptical of everyone (Henry, pg. 165). She wondered about heaven and if she had everything wrong and had hindered multitudes of people and that perhaps some would “try to persuade Peter to shut the gate against me” (Henry, pg.

165).

While Marie Henry does her best to show Hannah Whitall Smith as a slightly scarred saint and spiritual hero, thorough research and honest reporting reveals more of a confused, unhappy heretic than hero, someone whose life demonstrates that more attention needs to be given to the Word of God than to emotions, mystical inner “revelations” and fad doctrines. Smith’s view of God and her outspoken

Universalism put her squarely in the heretical camp.

An examination of Smith and her book is not complete without asking if the goal of the Christian life is happiness or holiness. Our days might be bitter, but God’s love remains sweet. In the light of the admissions by the Apostle Paul of times that even he was temporarily “cast down” (2 Corinthians 7), we cannot expect to be happy constantly until we get to heaven. 

Editorials

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aware of the lost spiritual condition of Jehovah’s Witnesses, but to call believers to unite in intercessory prayer for these lost souls throughout the year. Our prayer is that Jehovah’s Witnesses at every level will come to know the *real* Jesus Christ and trust Him for salvation (John 1:12-13; 3:14-18; 5:39-40).

Recently a woman from Michigan wrote to PFO and asked for a list of the members of the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses so that she could appeal before the throne of God specifically and individually by name for the salvation of these men. What an awesome God we commune with to think that we can plead His grace to transform the unregenerate minds and hearts of those in the top leadership position of this wicked organization. (Incidentally, the ten men who make up this board are: Carey Barber, John Barr, Lloyd Barry, President Milton Henschel, Ted Jaracz, Karl Klein, Gerrit Lösch, Albert Schroeder, Lyman Swingle and Dan Sydlik.)

In addition to praying for the Governing Body of the Watchtower Society, Christians are also encouraged to intercede on behalf of the workers at the various Bethel headquarters’ facilities; circuit, district and zone overseers; and elders, pioneers and missionaries. Just as important, we need to pray for the spiritual protection of the unsuspecting being proselytized into the Watchtower cult.

The words of John MacArthur certainly offer motivation and guidelines for the need of prayer.

He writes that,

“Prayer for the lost is ultimately directed at God as an act of worship, because the salvation of sinners causes them to give glory to Him. ... Praying for the lost should never be cold, detached, or impersonal, like a public defender assigned to represent a defendant. Understanding the depths of their misery and pain, and their coming doom, we must cry to God for the salvation of sinners” (*Alone With God*, pp. 135-136).

Charles Spurgeon once said,

“Before God does a great work, He calls His people to prayer.”

As prayer warriors on behalf of Jehovah’s Witnesses who need to be set free in Christ, let our voices be heard unto the Lord. God will honor the prayers of the saints for the lost. Our most effective evangelism begins with prayer. Our most powerful weapon is prayer. Consider where might your spiritual life be, had a concerned parent or friend not prayed for you to come to know the risen Savior? PFO, and the co-sponsoring ministries, call upon Christians around the world to commit as “prayer warriors” on behalf of Jehovah’s Witnesses and are asked to pray daily for all involved in the Watchtower.

For materials promoting this effort, including flyers, press releases and posters, write Dan Hall at Reveal Ministries, P.O. Box 52, Walnut Grove, CA 95690 or phone him at (916) 776-4705 or (916) 537-9058.

—MKG