



THE
PROPER
STUDY OF
RELIGION

Building on
Jonathan Z. Smith

SAM GILL

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Gill, Sam D., 1943– author.

Title: The proper study of religion : building on Jonathan Z. Smith / Sam Gill.
Description: New York, NY, United States of America : Oxford University Press, 2020. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020008748 (print) | LCCN 2020008749 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780197527221 (hardback) | ISBN 9780197527245 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Religion—Study and teaching. | Smith, Jonathan Z.

Classification: LCC BL41 .G47 2020 (print) | LCC BL41 (ebook) | DDC 200.7—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020008748>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020008749>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Integrated Books International, United States of America

In Memory of
Jonathan Z. Smith
1938–2017

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Acknowledgments

This book began to emerge in my process of preparing a short talk for a session honoring Jonathan Smith hosted by the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) in November 2018. Upon being invited to make a presentation I immediately knew that I wanted to talk about comparison and I wanted to ground it in Smith's Frazer studies, the subject of his Yale PhD dissertation. I set out by rereading all of his writings on comparison, and as I began to write, it quickly turned into a long piece with over one hundred footnotes, clearly inappropriate for the brief talk that was my objective. It became the chapter in this book "The Necessary Double-Face." In the midst of my writing on Smith and comparison, Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon's collection of Smith's lectures and interviews *Reading J. Z. Smith* was published. This collection was a delightful reminder of the many fascinating qualities, styles, and insights that characterized this remarkable man. What a loss we suffered, yet what a remarkable gift he was to us. I've always been aware of the extent of his influence on my work, but this collection made it evident how truly great is his legacy.

Included in this collection was Smith's 2010 lecture "Reading Religion: A Life in Learning." I found myself shocked by Smith's comments in this lecture regarding experience. Since I knew Smith's view on this matter, the shock was not so much Smith's position as it was how remarkably different it was from my own. My own approach to experience might be described as "dancing religion: a life in learning." This long-existing incongruity finally gave rise not only to considerable thought, but also to an urgent sense that I had to engage this notion of experience as carefully and honestly and extensively as I possibly could. And I had to do so in conversation with Smith's work. I realized that I could not just say that we were different in our respective views of experience and leave it at that because I knew that even my views on experience had been somehow inspired by Jonathan. This consideration of experience became the chapter "The Ordeal of Incongruity." Writing it was for me a revelatory and creative experience.

Reading J. Z. Smith included the interview of Smith conducted for the University of Chicago student newspaper *The Maroon* in which Smith told

the origin story of his walking cane. Then at the November 2018 meetings in Denver I was delighted that his cane was frequently referenced, often with a bit of humor, most memorably by Kimberley Patton. As I was writing the chapters for this book, drawing heavily on Smith's early Frazer work, I began to imagine my own fuller appreciation of Smith's cane as his own golden bough. Some serious, if occasional, imagination led me to see these ruminations on his cane would nicely introduce and serve as segue to my own theories and methods for grounding in movement, in the biology and philosophy of human self-moving, an expansion to the proper academic study of religion. Locating religion in the context of secular universities among the humanities, but also the social and even natural sciences, is a focal concern and objective I shared with Smith. The chapter "Smith's Golden Bough" is my effort to creatively forge ahead constantly inspired by Jonathan Smith.

Thus, much of this book is directly the result of these occasions of honoring Jonathan. I wish to thank Brad Stoddard, president of NAASR, for inviting me to do the presentation and to Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon for their guiding and hosting the meeting as well as their ongoing efforts to honor Smith, including their earlier collection *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith* (2008), their recent collection *Reading J. Z. Smith* (2018), and Russell McCutcheon's "In Memoriam: Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017)." In June 2018 I attended a conference honoring Jonathan Smith held at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim. The papers from that conference will be published titled *Imagining Smith*, edited by Barbara Krawcowicz. These collections, along with the forthcoming collection of essays from the November 2018 meetings, *Remembering J. Z. Smith: A Career and Its Consequences*, edited by Emily D. Crews and Russell T. McCutcheon, will keep vital Smith's legacy. I hope my own book will also serve both to honor Jonathan Smith and his remarkable legacy and also to offer some suggestions about how it might be engaged in the ongoing development of the study of religion.

Chapter 2, "No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*," was previously published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66/2 (1998): 59–88. Chapter 4, "Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion," was previously published in *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, and Histories in Central Australia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 178–211. Both reprinted with permission.

I wish to thank my family—Corbin, Jenny, Fatu, Shay, and Leon—for their support and for continually enriching my life. Thanks also to my good friends John Minear and Nancy Maxson, who cheer me on and offer engaging conversation about things that matter.

My thanks and deepest sympathy to Elaine Smith. Elaine so graciously kept me connected with Jonathan especially through the time of his illness. Since his death she has graciously been available as we have become friends joined through this great loss. I am grateful that I had the chance to spend time with Siobhan, Jonathan's daughter, trading fond stories and remembrances of him as we laughed through feelings of grief and sadness.

From the very first time we met, now over fifty years ago, Jonathan shocked me into being a better academic and a more creative and intelligent person. Throughout half a century I have always measured what I do in terms of standards that Jonathan set, as impossible as they were. So often I find myself remembering his comments on a single word or an idea. So often I recall something clever and funny and insightful that he said. So often as I explore new dimensions of my own work, I realize that they have come about by the inspiration of some newly discovered and appreciated aspect of Jonathan's work. I am deeply grateful for all that he did and was. I had no idea that this book would come about at the time of Jonathan's death. I have little sense about what he would have thought of it. He never failed to surprise me. I am deeply saddened by Jonathan's death. In the hope that this book might express my admiration and gratitude for Jonathan Smith that spanned half a century I dedicate this book to his memory.

Introduction

Building on Jonathan Z. Smith

On the last day of the year 2017 I received a message from Elaine Smith bearing the sad news that Jonathan had died the day before. He had mostly retired in 2013, and I knew that for some time he had been struggling with serious illness, yet regular reports from Elaine had given me hope. Still, the news of his death was sudden and shocking. I knew Jonathan for half a century. He was provocative, inspiring, challenging, and entertaining to all who knew him. He is widely recognized as the most important and influential scholar of religion in the last half century. Jonathan loved teaching and often shared his teaching methods and philosophies in lectures and writings; and, of course, most of his students were simply in awe of him. Jonathan's public lectures and his conference contributions were widely anticipated and enjoyed, inspiring and informing thousands of scholars. I found him warm and humane, funny and provocative, always ready with a story or a quip. I've heard dozens of accounts of memorable encounters with Smith. He was loved and admired by all.

Jonathan's death has led me to much introspection, both personal, as part of the inevitable accounting of my own life, and also academic, since I consider Jonathan the most influential person in my academic life. His career correlated almost exactly with the new era marked by the expansion of the academic study of religion into secular universities in the United States. His legacy is rich and challenging. It is time to honor Smith by carrying forward the inspiring theories, methods, and ideas he offered so eloquently and provocatively. It is time to study and reflect on Smith's body of writings, that our own work be more creative and important. It is time to build on Smith's rich foundational work, that we develop a study of religion properly situated in the modern secular university and one that will significantly contribute to our complex world.

At a North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) session dedicated to remembering and honoring Smith in November 2018, I did

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DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197527221.001.0001

a brief talk. In my opening comments I characterized my feelings on that occasion as bittersweet. I felt the bitterness of the profound loss of a great man who had immense influence on me and on the profession I've been part of for most of my life. Yet I also felt a certain sweetness in joining with others to remember Jonathan and to honor not only his contribution but also the remarkable person that he was. Many that day shared stories of encounters they had had with Jonathan; most were humorous, all were sweet. At the end of that session Jonathan's daughter, Siobhan, told me that his favorite style of chocolate was bittersweet.

In daring to write anything about Jonathan Z. Smith—his legacy and how he set forth the criteria for a proper academic study of religion—I'm embarrassed by my own audacity, and I question its appropriateness. That old adage "standing on the shoulders of giants" seems too modest somehow to capture anything like the humility I feel related to Smith. He had a fuller, more expansive, and deeper education upon graduating high school than I have now after more than half a century as an academic. I'm not exaggerating. He had read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* by the time he started high school! While I have read (tried to read) everything Smith published, there remain broad swaths of topics and sources in his writings that are beyond my language and educational capabilities. Yet I have read and repeatedly read a good many of his publications, and I have given careful attention to writing about some of his most persistent topics. I have also been devoted to the development of a study of religion appropriate to secular academic institutions over a period nearly coincident with the broad expansion in the United States of religion departments in these universities.

I first met Jonathan Smith half a century ago. He and I arrived at the University of Chicago at about the same time; I as a student in fall 1967; Smith as faculty in fall 1968. He had held faculty positions at Dartmouth and the University of California, Santa Barbara, before coming to Chicago. He was widely recognized at the time as among the brightest and most promising of young religion scholars. He was soon awarded the chair as the William Benton Professor of Religion and the Human Sciences in the College of the University of Chicago (1974). In 1982 he was named the Robert O. Anderson Distinguished Service Professor of the Humanities. A fuller account of Smith's extensive and distinguished career is available in his bibliographic, autobiographical essay "When the Chips Are Down" (2004) along with a bibliography, "Jonathan Z. Smith: Publications, 1966–2003,"¹ complemented by Russell

¹ Both of these are in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), "Chips," 1–60, and "Publications," 391–402.

McCutcheon's thoughtful and warm remembrance "In Memoriam: Jonathan Z. Smith (1938-2017)"² and the collection of Smith interviews and lectures gathered and introduced by Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith* (2018).³

I grew up in a farm town in rural Kansas. Although I was the son of a small-scale wheat farmer, my acquaintance with this kind of grass scarcely aligned me with Smith's intent as a young man to become an agrostologist, a student of grass breeding. I did an undergraduate degree in mathematics and a graduate degree in business at Wichita State University. For several years I developed a successful career in the corporate world, working as a research analyst designing and installing computer business applications at the advent of business electronic computing. When I arrived in Chicago I had taken only one course in religion taught by a political scientist, Harry Corbin; he had been university president. Feeling the need to take a sabbatical from my business career before devoting my life to it, as I'd fully expected to do, I asked Harry Corbin what he'd suggest I might do for this sabbatical. He suggested his alma mater, the University of Chicago. I think my response was, "Oh, do they have a university?" My idea to study religion was primarily because I'd taken a religion course from him. I was only mildly shocked by my acceptance to the Divinity School, and I didn't really comprehend until more recently than I'd care to admit that no doubt I was accepted only because of the ensuing explosion of religion departments throughout American public universities. Of course, I had no awareness of this at all. Thanks to Justice Clark's opinion in a Supreme Court ruling in *Abington v. Schempp*, 1963, the number of religion departments grew from 25 in 1960 to 173 by 1966.⁴ By the time I applied to Chicago in the winter of 1966–67 the demand for religion scholars was significant, and Chicago was one of the main suppliers.⁵ I had been a dutifully good student, hard-working

² In *Religious Studies News American Academy of Religion*, January 5, 2018. <http://rsn.aarweb.org/articles/memoriam-jonathan-z-smith-1938%E2%80%932017> (consulted December 21, 2018).

³ Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Reading J. Z. Smith: Interviews and Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴ These statistics were provided by Smith, "Reading Religion: A Life in Learning," in Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 55.

⁵ Prior to the 1963 Supreme Court decision, what I'm calling a proper academic study of religion suitable to a secular university was legal only in private colleges and universities, yet many of these had even then strong religious roots. Thus, one studies religion in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, rather than the Religion School. Many private universities had a religious background, as did the University of Chicago. "A distinguished Semiticist and a member of the Baptist clergy, William Rainey Harper believed that a great research university ought to have as one central occupation the scholarly study of religion, to prepare scholars for careers in teaching and research, and ministers for service to the church. These commitments led him to bring the Morgan Park Seminary of the Baptist Theological Union to Hyde Park, making the Divinity School the first professional

and responsible, more or less, but I hadn't a clue about the study of religion, about history and cultures around the world, or about language or anything intellectual. I wasn't particularly religious. I've often had the fantasy that, upon reading my application for admission, some faculty admissions group in the Divinity School thought it might be fascinating to see what on earth someone with my background and preparation would do in the University of Chicago environment.

Although, as a student at Chicago, once I'd caught a glimpse of the richness (if vaguely from afar) of parts of the world I hadn't even known existed, once I got a hint at this remarkable person Jonathan Z. Smith, it became abundantly clear that I could not return to business or to Kansas; there's an Oz joke there somewhere. Yet I still felt the constant discomfort of being an utter outsider, a misfit, and that feeling has never fully subsided. Eventually I came to appreciate that the strangeness of my background and my incongruity with the perspectives commonly brought to the field had potential advantages; I've been attempting to realize those for half a century. Certainly, the one constant I've had throughout these decades has been my appreciation for and admiration of Smith. Though it is completely beyond my capacity to follow great swaths of his work, I have felt both his work and his presence an unceasing inspiration, a drawing forth from me more than I'd known I had in me. It is likely not incidental that my attraction to Smith's work has been related to my constant personal experience of incongruity as a misfit.

In many ways Jonathan Smith and I are so remarkably different that my following him through the decades seems an unlikely connection needing exploration (maybe psychoanalysis), yet adequate explanation is likely not possible. I think in some senses this little book has come forth to do a bit of that reflection, or is a byproduct of it. While it might be argued that these matters are surely personal and do not deserve any public eye, or that they may not be appropriate to it, I believe that they might be engaged in a way that is not only of broad interest, but also has some sense of urgency and

school at the University of Chicago." <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/history-and-mission> (consulted December 19, 2018). The necessary transformation from a religious to a secular environment was not limited to the way religion was taught; the theories and methods of research and writing religion had to undergo extensive transformation. With the rapid expansion of the study of religion, PhD programs did not have sufficient time to produce students explicitly trained for this new study. Furthermore, the criteria for this new study were not even established. The majority of these faculty positions were filled by scholars with seminary training and personal and religious connections with specific religions, most predominantly Protestant Christianity.

relevance. I've tried to make it so. As I've reflected extensively on Jonathan over this time since his death, I believe, as much as anything, our most important common ground is our conviction to contribute significantly to a proper academic study of religion.

While across my career I have spent much time in the study of a number of specific cultures, my appreciation of the local, of the species, has always been interwoven with my abiding interest in broader concerns (the genera), in what I'm trying to clearly set forth in this book, of establishing a proper academic study of religion. By this use of the word "proper" I mean a study of religion that is appropriate to and legal in a secular university, as a field of academic study that has a responsibility to offer insight and guidance to the global presence of religions and all the complex issues and situations that arise around the world and throughout history due to religions and religious differences. Anything short of these goals seems to me a failure of the challenge that gave birth to so many departments half a century ago and is a failure to follow the models, examples, and goals that Smith so persistently challenged us with throughout his career. Thus, especially in light of Jonathan's recent death, I feel some urgency in contributing to the development of this field at this time; if not now, when?

While a thorough study of all of Smith's work is appropriate at this time and would be of great value, it is a task far beyond my capabilities. I hope that someone will soon take on this task. My work here is focused on select areas and concerns that I believe are core to much of Smith's work, yet would perhaps not be obvious to others. My attention is often drawn to Smith's style⁶ and perspective, but also to his philosophy and technique. My intent is to offer concrete examples of a movement forward in the development of a proper academic study of religion that arises from my creative encounter with select examples of Jonathan Smith's work and the inspiration gained from doing so.

Throughout this book I intend to honor the humor and play that pervade Jonathan Smith's lectures and writings, yet also to call attention to his remark that religion was of interest to him because it made him laugh. He said, "When I break out laughing while reading a text, that is where I want to

⁶ I have only recently become aware that a sizable number of scholars seem to dislike Jonathan's writing style and also his style of argument. They seem to find his writing complex and difficult. They seem to believe he is inconsistent, changing his views often. Part of what I will attempt to show in this book is that such assessments may be short-sighted and amount to a misunderstanding of Jonathan's writing and argumentation style.

focus. Because when something surprises me, it also draws my attention.”⁷ Laughter, joke, and riddle are for Smith much more than surface elements of style. They are markers of the glorious surprise of incongruity and difference that are at the heart of his understanding of comparison, innovation, experience, and the core dynamics of both the religious and also the academic life. The persistent interest I have throughout this book, the tracking of themes of continuity throughout Smith’s work, the energetics that I believe must inspire us as we go forward in our study of religion and humanity are present as the echoing sound of Smith’s laughter upon reading a surprising passage.

By titling this book *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith*, I first want to foreground my sense of urgency that a study of religion must be fully appropriate, that is, proper, to a secular environment, both inside and outside the academy. I consider the Supreme Court decision in 1963 as marking the beginning of this period. I knew and worked with many of the scholars involved in the rapid expansion of the field, the founders, one might say. My first full-time regular position was at Arizona State University. Among several other new faculty, I was one of the founders of that religious studies department. I was tasked with establishing the field of Native American religious studies enabled by a grant from the Eli Lilly Foundation. For a decade I stayed in that department before moving to the University of Colorado. While I continued Native American studies, I expanded my interests to Australian Aboriginal cultures and maintained a persistent interest in writing on religion theory. Several decades ago I expanded into the study of dancing in religious and cultural contexts and, beyond dancing, to interests in movement, body, the human senses from biological and philosophical perspectives. These studies involved traveling to study and learn dances in a number of cultures around the world. Recently my interests have expanded to technology and futurist studies, something of a return to the math and technology of my earlier degrees and jobs. At this time, most of those whose careers began in the middle to late 1960s are retired or deceased. It is a time of reckoning. Has the academic study of religion come of age? Has the academic study of religion earned a stable and rightful place in the modern secular university? My sense is that neither of these questions can be confidently answered with a strong affirmative, thus the importance and urgency of this book.

⁷ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 49–50.

By subtitling the book *Building on Jonathan Z. Smith*, I give focus to how I pursue the larger discussion of developing a proper academic study of religion. While I believe it is widely acknowledged that Jonathan Smith has had an outsized influence on the study of religion throughout this first generation and while I think many current scholars in the field are aware of Smith, I feel that the richness and abundance of his work have yet to be adequately engaged in the shaping of the field. As I have followed and been inspired by Smith's work these many decades, even when my interests and background have been so very different from his, I believe that the majority of the field has moved in a direction that does not engage or follow Smith and his vision for what a proper study should (must?) be; he noted this himself. By the subtitle I intend to signal that what I present in this book largely builds through my creative engagement of Smith's work, something of a conversation. Much of what I present of Smith is based on what in his work I have been engaged by and how I have read and understood and valued his work. Yet the book is not a summary or critique of Smith but rather my building on his foundational legacy. My ideas and interests are presented on their own merits, to be critically evaluated by others. I make no claim to accurately or authentically or thoroughly or representatively present Smith's work. It is essential that I acknowledge that my work almost invariably builds on the foundation he constructed. Others may understand and read Jonathan Smith differently than I do; that's the richness of his work.

Jonathan Smith is widely credited as being among the most influential religion scholars in the last several decades. At the 2010 American Academy of Religion annual meeting, in her introduction of Smith's plenary lecture, "Reading Religion: A Life in Learning," Anne Taves said, "Smith has not only tackled the central issues in the study of religion, he has also modeled how to engage respectfully with and at the same time dissent from that which we have inherited."⁸ She captures the dual role Smith played: powerful critic as well as innovative and creative builder of a new field of humanities study.

From the beginning of his career Smith rose to meet the challenges faced by the field in this new era. I suggest that his studies in botany and especially his massive study of Frazer, which required his deep reading of thousands of ethnographies and works of history representing cultures across the globe, were essential to his formation of a perspective not otherwise present or well developed at the time (or since). Arguably Smith set the criteria, the models,

⁸ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 112.

and the agenda to develop a proper study of religion in a secular academic setting, yet he did so by making incisive critical valuations of the common assumptions about the study of religion at the time, assumptions that were understandably a part of the religious preparations of many of the scholars entering the field at its beginning. For decades we have followed and been inspired and challenged by Smith, yet I believe that we remain a long way from adequately achieving the measure and potential of his work, example, and inspiration.⁹

Smith's career-long colleague Burton Mack, John Wesley Professor Emeritus in early Christianity at the Claremont School of Theology, describes how stunned he was by Smith the first time he heard him lecture. The occasion was Smith's 1977 lecture "Sacred Persistence" at Scripps College, later published as "Sacred Persistence: Towards a Redescription of Canon."¹⁰ Mack's comments published in 2008 are worth quoting at length in that they serve as an outline of the criteria for a proper academic study of religion that Smith constructed.

The effect was stunning. No ontologized Sacred. No divine agency. No dramatic breakthrough events, whether primordial or personal. No romanticism. No mysticism. No otherworldly symbolism. Instead, human ingenuity, taking note of situations, crafting languages, constructing grammars, working with symbol systems, manipulating displacements, marking icons, attending to collective ratiocination, deciding upon strategies of application, rules of exegesis, classification, comparison structural social and imaginary world-building. "Religion as a focusing lens" . . . "Religion as a human labor." . . . I did not know it then, but Smith had just "rectified" several categories operative in the history of religion, "redescribed" a number of "situations," compared them in terms of their differences, located the analogical links between them at the level of social and intellectual structures, produced several convincing generalizations without abstracting universals, demystified the "sacred," and redefined

⁹ In their introduction to *Reading J. Z. Smith*, Braun and McCutcheon note that while much of Smith's contribution to the broad development of the field was to offer critique and an alternative to Eliade's "academic theology" (as I call it), the current young generation of religion scholars have made a return to something more akin to Eliade. They write, "The field has, for some, turned into one where we somehow already know that things just are religious" (ix). Given this "return," I feel an urgency to a serious discussion of Smith, especially his perspectives on comparison.

¹⁰ In W. Scott Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, vol. 1, *Theory and Practice* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 11–28 and in Smith's *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 36–52.

“religion” as a human enterprise of intellectual engagements with interest in the everyday. Much of the old terminology could still be used to make sure we stayed in touch with the familiar (canon, exegesis, hermeneutics, divinization, ritual, the sacred, etc.), but no term still meant the same.¹¹

Mack’s description includes a number of things Smith would later become well known for. To exclude some ontologized sacred means there are no ontologically marked data for religion; that there is no presumption that something termed sacred independently exists; thus, there is nothing particularly special or other or, dare I say, religious about the study of religion.¹² That there is no divine agency, no dramatic breakthrough events follows on the no-sacred statement, thus placing religion fully in the realm of human agency and creativity and history.¹³ By expanding on the no-breakthrough events to include “primordial or personal,” Mack indicates that Smith saw myth not as a primordial given, somehow an objective account of beginning times, but rather as a human invention with, as he held, its value being in its application to the situations arising in history. Not only are myths human constructs that apply to history, they also themselves have histories, that is, they change throughout time as they are used, as they are adapted to be applied. That there are no personal breakthrough events would indicate that markers of religion such as transcendence, revelation, mysticism, and religious experience (understood as somehow special)¹⁴ all originate with and depend on human capacities, however they come to be articulated when described or conceptualized. Thus, as Mack emphasized: no romanticism, no mysticism, no otherworldly symbolism.

As would come to be a signature position of Smith’s understanding, religion, as a category for comparative study, is the invention of the scholar,¹⁵

¹¹ Burton Mack, “Sacred Persistence?,” in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith* (London: Equinox, 2008), 299.

¹² Should these *religious* markers of religion be allowed in a proper study of religion, it would confine the secular academic to, at best, a limited project, or an illegitimate endeavor bound to fail, unless of course the academic is also religious. I personally experienced this restriction in my study of Native American religions, which was sometimes labeled as illegitimate explicitly because I am not Native American.

¹³ This view differs from the common religious assumptions that the distinguishing feature of religion is its ineffability, its incomprehensibility, its givenness by God, its holiness (numinosity), its Wholly Otherness, as Rudolf Otto put it, or the hierophany language in Mircea Eliade’s academic theology, or the strange propensity, shared by academic and folk, in identifying religion as good.

¹⁴ As is indeed Ann Taves’s understanding of the term. See her *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Smith’s statement is often read as indicating that this academic invention is the exclusive existence of any generic understanding of religion. I think it clear that in the recent global awareness a

and the data included in the study become relevant only as designated so by the scholar. A religion scholar need not have special sensitivities or received awareness or unexplained religious experience or any particular set of religious beliefs; indeed, the effect of these factors, should they exist, must be set aside (and certainly it is questionable if such setting aside is even possible). The important distinction articulated by Justice Clark's opinion¹⁶ that "religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education may . . . be effected consistently with the First Amendment" has often been presented as the distinction of teaching religion for religious purposes and teaching *about* religion in a secular environment. The term "about" comes from Old English *onbutan*, "on the outside of; around the circumference of, enveloping; in the vicinity of, near; hither and thither, from place to place," suggesting that a legal academic study/teaching of religion cannot be a witness statement from a religious person (even allowing that this person, an insider, might be a scholar), but rather a study from the perspective *outside* those studied. Given that, in the early days of the field, most scholars who entered the secular academies to teach religion had seminary and religious training, the very situating of scholars with respect to their subject has been a major concern.¹⁷ These religiously oriented scholars (usually Christian) were the only ones available to fill all these new positions. Most of them served several decades as the principal scholars in the field. The issue of the religious backgrounds of most scholars in secular institutions had enormous influence on the development of the first generation of the field.

The balance of Mack's statement sets forth in positive terms the outlines of the program Smith was developing for a study of religion properly (and legally) located in a secular environment.

Building on Smith's foundation, we must acknowledge that the scholars' invention labeled "religion" must be informed by some interactive process of

great many folk (meaning nonacademics) use the term in some generic sense and that they are not doing so as informed by some academic definitional discourse. The term, of course, has been around for centuries, yet with a usage more confined to particular traditions. Likely the increasing use of the term as a generic categorical designation encompassing multiple religions has been more the invention of modern globalist awareness.

¹⁶ Justice Clark's opinion included this passage: "Education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment."

¹⁷ An insightful collection of materials on this topic is Russell T. McCutcheon (ed.), *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

negotiating academic articulations and inventions with tentatively inscribed historical and cultural exempla. This process of invention means that *religion* exists as a comparative category in an ongoing negotiative and evolving process; the process is the subject of much of the ongoing work of the field. Religion exists in the midst of continuing inquiry, not either at its beginning or its end.¹⁸ Scholars should not attempt to define religion with universal acceptance, yet the ongoing discourse regarding the distinction that constitutes religion is essential. Religion designates a field for playful discourse, a fluid category impacted by an ongoing, open, academic enterprise of comparison. For the results of the academic endeavor to be insightful, useful, and enduring both within and outside the academy, the field of possible exempla must be global and historically inclusive, also tentative and open. Yet to demand that the work of the religion scholar be limited to this inventive and comparative endeavor, especially on a global level, would be an inbred and narcissistic disaster (and I think in many areas it actually is); yet, to be properly academic, all religion scholarship must be aware of, embrace, and be shaped by this ongoing process as distinctive of the field.

I find, as have others, including Smith, the term “religion” (singular) to be a sensible and simple way of designating the academic invention as well as the modern folk identity of a category that designates various activities, practices, objects, and perspectives across human cultures.¹⁹ The plural term “religions” then designates the corresponding cultural and historical data and material that comprise the subject of study.

Nearly half a century into the development of the study of religion, Smith reflected on its progress. In his 2010 American Academy of Religion lecture,

¹⁸ It seems to me a mistake to follow the common practice of defining religion on the first day of class in Introduction to Religion courses. It is also a mistake to begin any research on the presumption of a broadly accepted definition of religion.

¹⁹ I believe folk taxonomies and terminology are important for us to include and consider, even as we are deliberating on how to function properly as academics. There might be some implication (hoped for, yet I think unlikely) that what we have been doing as students of religion for the last half century has influenced the folk views of religion. I frankly think few scholars ever give the consequence of their work much thought even as they are teaching people most of whom are not bound to become academics. Yet I think it should be a mandate of the study of religion, especially because of the central role that religion plays in the world that impacts the lives of most folk throughout the world. We live in a time when specialists are often vilified rather than sought for their expertise, yet I can't imagine how we scholars can feel what we do is worth what we get paid unless we have some strong conviction to contribute to the international discourse on religion and its roles and impacts on all human beings. This mandate alone demands that we take seriously the importance of the work of inventing religion.

“Reading Religion: A Life in Learning”²⁰ he included in his summation a statement on the direction of the academic study of religion. In the context of the explosion of religion departments that occurred in the 1960s,²¹ Smith reflected,

The groundwork, it seemed to me, *then* [the 1960s] was there laid for the development of a generic study of *religion*, but that expectation has largely remained unrealized. We seem still committed to the priority of species over genera, apparently confident that a focus on the former is the route to a responsible consideration of the latter without, however, much reflection on how one sort of expertise might, in fact, lead to the other.²²

Concerned that Smith’s point might be missed or misunderstood, the editors of the volume in which Smith’s lecture is printed, Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon, felt an emphasizing footnote to be helpful. They write,

Another way to phrase Smith’s point might be to cite the general lack of interest among the majority of current scholars with studies of religion (in the singular), understood as a human phenomenon, especially with studies that apply explanatory tools from the social and natural sciences, in order to account for the tendency to be religious, while also noting the obvious wealth of so-called area studies in the field, devoted to studying the history or features of the religions in the plural, such as Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, etc.²³

Despite the extensive consideration of what constituted the groundwork for a proper academic study of religion in a secular academic setting that was spawned by a few statements in Justice Clarke’s opinion, it appears that this interest in the generic, in genus, has been broadly supplanted by focus on species, on particular religions and certain periods or issues within those species. The broader work of accounting for the genus, religion, seems increasingly to have become the subject of the history of the field rather than

²⁰ This lecture was delivered at the invitation of the then president of the AAR, Ann Taves, for the annual lecture series “Lifetime of Learning Address.” It was published in Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 111–27.

²¹ Smith notes that as a result of Justice Clark’s statement, the field grew from just 25 departments in 1960 to 173 by 1966. See Smith, “Reading Religion,” 55.

²² Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 126.

²³ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 126 n. 24.

one of the ongoing construction and development of the category/theory. There are many reasons for this shift, yet several might be suggested. The academic study of religion has tended to borrow its fundamental theory from other fields. It is a field that has increasingly felt that historical and cultural description and explication and translation comprise an adequate study of the subject. It follows that the demands of mastering language and the considerable content of a particular species study are perhaps so great and are given such primacy that the study of the generic is forgotten or postponed indefinitely. Likely the implication that to study religion as genus, as generic, is a comparative enterprise and that the combination of the suspect history of this method (the old Christianity-privileging enterprise of comparative religion), the failure to articulate an adequately academic understanding of comparison, and the demands for knowledge and expertise in multiple species (the vast history and ethnography of religions in cultures throughout the world and human history) discourage comparison.²⁴ Smith's own studies of comparison were extensive, yet he tended to declare each and all of the comparative methods he considered to be inadequate (I'll return to a fuller consideration of this subsequently); yet, his statements, better understood, were not intended to discourage, but rather to encourage, comparison.

As a member of a department founded in the 1970s that followed the common model of specifying faculty hires to represent a range of religions, cultures, and approaches, I was always troubled to articulate what constituted the common concerns of the department. We often touted the breadth of our representation of religions around the world, including "traditional religions,"²⁵ now more commonly "indigenous religions," but it was never possible to articulate with any precision our common discourse. Comparison was often mentioned as a likely candidate, yet we were not successful in

²⁴ In my studies of technology, specifically AI/robots as they develop toward sentience, I have found a similar kind of assumption. The technological development is based on the proposition that the persistent development of computing power (calculation speed and storage capacity) will eventually lead to a breakover, a singularity, when the AI/robot becomes independent and sentient. Those interested in this process depend on the continuation of the pattern of expansion established over the last couple of decades identified as Moore's Law. The debate then centers on when in the future this breakover will occur and what will be the implications to human beings. I've been critical of this technological premise in that it seems to be based on the idea that a component of sentience (the correlate of the thinking part) will eventually influence, create actually, a whole entity that is comparable to, even more advanced than, natural sentience. This is magical thinking on the order of Tylor and Frazer and, in my view, an utter misunderstanding of both sentience and science. Did I just write this?

²⁵ For comments on this awkward and unacceptable term, see "Not by Any Name," in Sam Gill, *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Difference: Perspectives and Strategies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), 47–56.

indicating what we understood comparison to be, especially being sensitive that the old comparative religion history and seminary model had to be avoided. One year we invited a number of visiting lecturers to address the issue “What is comparison in the study of religion?” It didn’t lead to much clarity. For the most part we each taught our area and left the comparison to be done by the students in the hallways or the local bars. Still, it is impossible to responsibly ignore comparison as playing an essential and unavoidable role in any proper study of religion. It is widely acknowledged, yet the discourse has been as confusing as clarifying.²⁶

Most who know even a bit about Smith are aware that he wrote often and with insight about comparison. Still, I feel that comparison as a method, so fundamental to a proper academic study, is not used with the awareness and care that it should be, not in ways that offer the greatest creativity and potential. In my first chapter, “The Necessary Double-Face: Jonathan Z. Smith and Comparison,” I review the various ways that Smith considered comparison. His work on Frazer is foundational to his understanding of comparison. He studied a great many examples of comparison performed broadly in anthropology and religion across history to offer a critical presentation of a taxonomy of styles, classes, and methods of comparison. He offered his own proper use of comparison as a technique both in abstract terms as well as in extended applications. Unfortunately, Smith’s style often foregrounded his rather harshly critical conclusions about not only individual scholar’s works of comparison, but also about most classes and styles of comparison. In that chapter I attempt to re-examine the possibly discouraging impact of Smith’s critical perspective by placing it in the larger context of his style of presentation and argumentation. Without doubt, Smith strongly believed comparison to be essential to a proper academic study.

Beyond presenting, critiquing, and evaluating Smith’s studies of comparison, I have been interested in what I have come to understand as the underlying energetics, or structurality, of Smith’s view of comparison (and comparison in its most basic structural sense), evident in his own extensive studies, hinted at occasionally, but never explicitly articulated in a sustained description and presentation. I looked to his Frazer work for a way to

²⁶ Recent evidence of this state of comparative affairs is Bruce Lincoln’s statement in *Apples and Oranges: Explorations in, on, and with Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018) seeming to indicate that, despite his many writings on comparison, he believes Smith considered comparison dead as a religion technique, while the grand patternist model of Eliade, so often critiqued by Smith, has offered the ongoing model.

articulate these comparative dynamics and found there his use of the provocative term “necessary double-face,” a term he used to describe Frazer’s enterprise. Learning of these dynamics reorients our understanding of comparison, from its being limited to a rational linear technique to its being the thrust of ongoing inquiry, generating exploration and appreciation occasioned by gains of knowledge and insight.

Decades ago I became interested in masks and masking because I so often observed them in my studies of Native Americans and later in Bali, Java, Ghana, and Mali. I was fascinated by the obvious artificiality of masks, which often contrast in so many ways with the human masker, the person wearing the mask. The very term “mask” denotes a double presence. In contrast to disguise—which hides but also obliterates one’s identity as it appears to others, supplanting it with another identity—mask reveals two quite distinct identities at the same time. As the “sock and buskin” masks that conjoin comedy and tragedy of ancient Greek theater, mask itself denotes the copresence of two identities, usually distinct and different. My studies of Hopi masking suggested to me that, in a religious understanding, the two faces must be held together without any resolution. Mask is the play of one and two.

I was faced with the issue of how to best understand this unresolved copresence, and in doing so I kept returning to the topic of play. When things are in play or at play, the system most commonly ensures that the sense of play continues even if the goal is to win; yet the play ends when there are results. Play then indicates the moving dynamics of ongoingness, the necessary double-face, although I didn’t at first use that term related to play. I looked to a wide range of philosophers, more so than anthropologists who study games, to comprehend this fascinating dynamic. Later I realized that the mechanics of the movement of animate organisms is based on this same notion of play; we often refer to these neuromuscular dynamics as tone, tonus; a tensional oppositional dynamic of readiness. My study of play has been ongoing for decades.

It is little wonder that as I reviewed Smith’s writings as they appeared over the years in which I continued my study of play, I began to find extensive evidence not only that Smith’s studies might be understood in terms of the dynamics of play, but also that he often used the terminology of play to articulate his understanding of myth, ritual, and religion, even religion scholarship. I found it also stunning that his Frazer work was titled “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*.” His use of

play terminology in this work is extensive and explicit. Riddle and joke are distinguished by juxtaposing incongruities without resolution. Getting the joke, appreciating the riddle, is not to resolve but rather to embrace the incongruity.

In chapter 2, “No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*,” I examine a range of Smith’s works to lift up his explicit use of play as characteristic of his method, but also his understanding of religion as the scholar’s invention and religions as the cultural historical practices, behaviors, and institutions of interest to the religion scholar. I do so also in light of philosophical discourses on play, dating from Friedrich Schiller in the late eighteenth century on through to Jacques Derrida.

By persistently and strongly declaring that he prefers the study of dead religions and the study of texts, Smith has often seemed to shun experience as having anything to do with the study of religion despite the obviously bodied sensual richness of most anything we associate with religions. Since I have devoted thirty years to dancing and the study of dancing in cultures around the world and to many visits to Native American communities, it is this area that perhaps seems to most starkly separate my interests and research from Smith’s. The motivating event that led me to consider writing this book was my sudden awareness of how important it is for me now to take on the challenge of understanding Smith in light of the primacy, for me, of dancing and sensory experience through decades of my own research, writing, and life. I believe that the issues related to text, experience, body, senses, and movement are at the heart of the development and establishment of a proper academic study of religion.

What I found and consider at some length in chapter 3, “The Ordeal of Incongruity: Jonathan Z. Smith and Experience,” is that Smith’s writing—his style perhaps as an exemplification of his theories—is much more nuanced and complex than might be evident, especially if one focuses only on his most frequently quoted passages. The sober inquiry into what Smith says about experience and his inclusion and perspectives on experience throughout his writing provide a context for the long discourse on whether or not the experience of the researcher/writer has any legitimate role in an academic study. It also offers the context for a critique of the widespread assumption that “religious experience” is something special or mystical or peak or extraordinary.

I offer the beginnings of a theory of experience that reshapes the way we understand these foundational theoretical issues. Building on Smith, I also

show that those occasions in the study of religion, but also in living a religious life, that are most creative and motivating are those commonly associated with incongruity, one of Smith's most common and persistent interests. Incongruity is not a logically or objectively measured or designated condition. Incongruity is something known when it is experienced, felt, known because it is felt. Charles Sanders Peirce focused on this aspect of creative inference through his long life under the topic he usually termed *abduction*. Smith often said incongruity gives rise to thought. Peirce showed that abduction (the incongruous feeling of surprise) gives rise to hypotheses and creativity and knowledge. Whether one dances the dances of other peoples or walks to the bookshelf and reads a new text, the common experience of incongruity—often experienced, as Smith showed, as an ordeal—is a fundamental and necessary one. Yet the experience can also be one of delight; as I have already mentioned, he frequently said he was interested in studying religion because it made him laugh. Still, how one pursues experience in the engagement of the study of religion—or the efforts to be religious, for that matter—is not simple and easy to describe. It raises fundamental questions that demand serious and ongoing discourse in pursuit of a proper academic study of religion. Thus, while exemplified in one respect by personal difference between Smith's and my practice of religion studies, the concerns and discourse regarding experience are, I believe, foundational to the field of study.

It is notable to me that as we practice a profession, we are bound to our colleagues in an unspoken relationship of trust, yet on the surface the professional relationship often appears one of contention and withering criticism. One of the ways we trust our professional colleagues is to assume that their quotation and citation of exempla to support their arguments are done more or less accurately, even objectively, and that the exempla they present of their subjects are accurate. Yet Smith's earliest work puts the lie to this trusting assumption. In his study of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* Smith read Frazer's presentation of his cultural examples against the sources from which he drew these examples. Given that Smith estimated Frazer gave on the order of one hundred thousand examples by the time he finished the third edition, this was obviously an enormous job. He found that Frazer often took liberty, to the point of complete concoction, with his examples.

I was challenged by another scholar (in a very friendly way) regarding my presentation of a cultural example from Central Australia that I plucked whole from a book by my teacher Mircea Eliade. Much to my

embarrassment, I realized that I had not checked Eliade's original sources; I'd trusted my teacher. At the time I was reeling from this revelation I read a newly published book by Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (1987) and was stunned to see that Smith's first chapter, "In Search of Place," was devoted to a critique of Eliade's use of this very same example. In typical fashion for Smith, he seemed to devastate Eliade's use of the very example I had trustingly used without checking its source. Of course, he checked the sources and used source criticism to show not just the error of Eliade's example, but also, much more importantly, to critique his theory of religion and to offer an alternative interpretation to the source materials based on what he claimed was the more accurate presentation.

By the time I read Smith's chapter I had read a good many of the Australian sources and realized that he too had reported on these materials in ways that I had read quite differently than did he. I found myself obsessed with the very simple (or profoundly difficult) task of attempting to exhaustively trace the Aboriginal examples cited by both Eliade and Smith through every level of presentation—their print sources, then the field journals and notebooks of these authors and their own histories—in the attempt to get to the actual source, the specific Aboriginal persons who provided these materials. And even further to evaluate these individuals in terms of their place and knowledge and authority in their own cultures. All scholarship that proclaims it is the study of some specific folks is premised on the accuracy of the exempla that should be traceable to the sources, to the real folks that are the actual subjects. I spent years, including multiple trips to Australia, to both libraries and geographic locations, in this effort.

What I learned in this process was something I believe essentially important to the development of a proper academic study of religion, to our connection and relationship with our subjects. Rather than following Smith's style of deconstructive criticism, I attempted to present what I increasingly came to appreciate: that the study of others is always a creative encounter. It must be accounted for in terms of stories of encounter. In "Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion," chapter 4, I outline the stories of encounter that I discovered (and created) in this complex study. To make it most valuable—that is, to move beyond simply a niche source-critical study—I cast this story as a comparison of Eliade's and Smith's use of their sources, their understanding of comparison, and their theories and approaches to the study of religion. And, of course, I couldn't simply do this as an objective observer, but also as an interested participant. This work is part of an academic theory

I developed—I call it *storytracking*—in which the various parties to a creative encounter are considered in the terms of their own histories and perspectives in the interest of articulating a humane method for the study of people, cultures, and religions.

An image never far from my awareness while reflecting on Smith and a proper study of religion was the walking cane he used through his last couple decades. Others have been fascinated with it as well, especially his students. I began to see all sorts of associations with it, and I have been delighted that others have seen connections I did not. I began to see that it provided an image by which to reflect on Smith's personal and academic style, on what distinguished him and his work. The cane suggests connection with mobility, style, a wizardly wand. Since his Frazer studies were so important to my understanding of his work, I realized that this gnarly yellow branch of a rhododendron might be considered something like Smith's golden bough, a curiosity that leads to powerful inquiry. I consider various dimensions of this connection in the final chapter in this book, "Smith's Golden Bough: Moving toward a Proper Academic Study of Religion." Following Frazer as well, this golden bough is then a launching of my own views on a proper study of religion in conversation with Smith's work.

In no way should this book be considered a thorough and critical study of Smith's work, most especially this last chapter. It must be characterized as my reflections and constructions inspired by my creative encounters with Smith and his work over half a century. It is shaped by my own studies and life activities and personal history; how could it not? Such unavoidable influence is a fundamental argument of this book. I feel it essential that this book should end with my own presentation of what might and should constitute a proper academic study of religion based on, and noting it along the way, my appreciation of his work. I have followed Smith, yet our paths have been so very different in the ways that are obvious and observable. As I end this book with an effort to articulate a range of ideas and criteria for developing a proper study of religion, I do so in an effort to contribute to and encourage others to follow Smith and build on the foundation that is his legacy.

My approach, seemingly at odds with Smith's, begins with an argument for the primacy of human self-moving. I'm referring to the intentional and experienced moving of one's own body. Self-moving requires muscles and bones and the nervous system—indeed, all aspects of the human body—working as a complex organism, a unity that is a multiplicity. I begin with the declaration that humans are fundamentally animate organisms, at once akin to

all animals and also distinct as a species among them. We are not brain or mind or thought apart from body. We are not ghostly occupants of a vehicle (embodied). We are at once a unity and an organism of unimaginable complexity and internal diversity. Animate life is inseparable from self-moving. Self-moving is always body specific and done in the context of environment (other), and thus we must appreciate our human commonness both biologically and philosophically. This self-moving is for me the essential grounding of all religion studies that are done in a way proper to a secular environment. We are *always already body*.

Beginning here, I trace the implications of this presumption across a range of concerns to a proper academic study of religion. It applies to the academic (and folk) invention and development of a comparative category called religion, as well also to those data sets that we tend to identify as being religious, the stuff we study of others that we call religion.

Following the broad criteria that Smith developed for the study of religion, I discuss a range of topics that are shaped by the implications of self-movement. Concepts are fundamentally bodied and not abstract. Concepts are acquired by the gestural and natural movements of human bodies rather than in some formal, abstract, natural-language-based transmission (although language too eventually becomes important). There is an incorporeal aspect of corporeality. The process of moving is of the body, yet it is other than the body (virtual) in some senses; moving is never in any place, always transitioning, a virtual space between here and there. Self-moving always occurs in relation to what is beyond body, that is, in relationship to an environment, to an other. Self-moving is essential to perception in all animate organisms; humans have evolved the capacity to have a common sense (coenaesthesia) or a reflective awareness of sensing and moving. Thus, self-moving always involves a sense of otherness, a transcendence that, placed in a history of imagination (what Peirce called *musement*), leads to notions of horizon, outside, and even some contemplation of some final or ultimate or radical other.

Humans are also distinguished by a capacity to hold together two things that are at once considered the same or equals yet are also known all along to be not the same. I've termed this an *aesthetic of impossibles*. It is the dynamic of the necessary double-face of comparison (and joke and riddle and play); it is also the forte of religions, so commonly invoking outrageous impossibles. In the final chapter, I consider this aesthetic as it relates to self-moving, developing the implications for the study of religion. It is this aesthetic that I have

found in Smith's work on comparison, in his persistent consideration of incongruity, in his focus on play, in his use of joke and riddle to title his works and to hint at his fundamental insights, and finally as an essential principle for the study of religion.

Among other topics explored in this chapter is the idea of transduction, the reontologizing of something from one mode of reality to another. Academia is founded on this operation, reflected even in the common physical separation of the university from the rest of society. We study writings and numbers and charts and maps, yet these occupy a different ontological mode than do the behaviors, movings, actions, objects, encounters that they represent. Transduction is at once a severe limitation that we all too often don't seem to notice and also an alchemy that enacts the sort of magic that allows "the study of" anything at all—the Justice Clark inspiration of "about." My argument is for much greater attention to this important process as essential to a proper academic study.

Following Jonathan Smith's provocative consideration of the "end" of comparison, I find it important to ask the question "What is the 'end' of religion?" Setting off the word "end" in quotation marks gives it a sense of the double-face of both goals (that is, to what goals a study of religion should be directed) as well as the termination of the study altogether (perhaps as simply not viable in a secular environment, perhaps as successfully completed). Such a sober concern, I contend, must be an aspect of the ongoing study; the death of the field is as important a concern as is the death of an individual.

I conclude this chapter with reflections on Jonathan's cane, as well as a consideration of some of Smith's most clever and revealing titles. His titles often engage jokes, riddles, double entendres, puns, homophones, and jests. While they are clever and invite readers, I argue that they are also invariably concentrated nuggets that play out his theory. Jokes and riddles are not linear processes; they hold together conditions and objects that cannot be held together, and they do so not for the reason of demanding resolution or gaining a quantum of knowledge, but rather to fuel an ongoing oscillatory movement that is experienced as delight and fascination and obsession.

The chapters in this book are intended to build on one another to some final set of topics and propositions that will hopefully stimulate a rich discussion of what constitutes a proper academic study of religion, yet I have intended that each chapter might also be complete in itself. Throughout I honor Jonathan Smith's work by engaging aspects of it that I consider foundational and essential for the ongoing enterprise. From my rather

unusual perspective I've wanted to follow him in such a way as to understand his work perhaps differently than has been common, especially to those who limit their readings to the often-quoted jewels for which Smith is so well known. The future of a proper academic study of religion will be significantly enhanced, enriched, by our carefully building on the legacy of Jonathan Z. Smith.

1

The Necessary Double-Face

Jonathan Z. Smith and Comparison

What [Sir James George] Frazer has sensed in *The Golden Bough* is what later philosophers have termed the absurdity of the human condition. . . . Striving to conquer death by means of death, man asserts the reality of death, its omnipresence and omnipotence, all the more strongly. It is tragic, it is comic, it is absurd.¹

Frazer, as the chronicler of “these efforts, vain and pitiful, yet pathetic” (*Golden Bough*, vol. IX, p. 241), adopts the necessary double-face.²

Jonathan Smith’s description of Frazer’s strategy as “the necessary double-face” inspires a deeper appreciation of Smith’s understanding of comparison, which he considered one of his “persistent pre-occupations,”³ as well as the essential role of comparison in the development of the proper⁴ academic

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*” (New Haven: Yale University PhD dissertation, 1969), 376.

² Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 378.

³ Smith identifies and provides an overview discussion of “Taxonomy and Comparison” as one among five “persistent preoccupations” (“Chips,” 19–25).

⁴ I’ve found myself using this term “proper” to indicate an academic study of religion fully suitable to a secular environment. Certainly, academic studies of religion may occur in religious settings for religious purposes; this surely comprises most of the long history of religion studies. I feel the need to include the term “proper” in reference to studies of religion in nonreligious environments, like publicly funded colleges and universities (secular universities), because I believe that most studies of religion that presently occur in those private or religious environments either remain more appropriate to a religious setting with specific religious motivations or are not adequately self-conscious of the importance of engaging the field-marking concerns, that is, what distinguishes and is essential to a study of religion as a human comparative intellectual endeavor. The distinction I’m making here is not new to me; I addressed it in “The Academic Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1994): 201–11. Notably Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon use the term “a properly academic comparison” in their introductory essay to their edited volume *Reading J. Z. Smith*, viii.

study of religion.⁵ The obvious reference for the double-face is the “sock and buskin” mask of comedy and tragedy in ancient Greek theater.⁶ I suggest it also refers to that distinctly human delight in *impossible copresents*, the structurality of jest, joke, riddle, and play. Also, comparison.

As I consider how to summarize, clarify, and critically evaluate Smith’s understanding of comparison and, more importantly, to reveal and emphasize the creative and profound understanding of comparison as grounded and inspired by Smith, I believe the core ideas can be found in his 1969 Yale dissertation on Frazer’s classic *The Golden Bough*.⁷ He referred to Frazer’s work as “a laboratory of comparison.”⁸ The subtitle to the first edition of *The Golden Bough* was *A Study in Comparative Religion*.⁹ Smith’s 1963 Yale dissertation proposal bore the title “James George Frazer and the History of the Comparative Religions Methods.”¹⁰ Although it

⁵ This chapter is written in response to an invitation to contribute a presentation to a session honoring Jonathan Smith at the 2018 annual meeting of the NAASR (North American Association for Study of Religion) in Denver. Jonathan was my mentor for fifty years, and as I began to think about the possibilities of this chapter, so much seemed imperative to include in it. I wanted to focus on aspects of Smith’s work that I believe to be not only central and present throughout much of his writing yet also perhaps overlooked and underappreciated. I also wanted to extend the implications of this work toward the future developments in what I consider a proper academic study of religion, that is, one suitable for a secular environment. I also realized that I wanted my own history of reading Smith’s work as well as my personal encounters with him to be an important, if perhaps personal, part of the chapter. I also wanted to honor Jonathan’s love of footnotes and the broader contextualization of his work in a deep history of what to many might seem tangential concerns. While I certainly don’t have anything remotely comparable to Smith’s intellectual or knowledge horsepower, I can use footnotes to offer, on the one hand, a parallel, somewhat personal, narrative (a collection of stories) and, on the other, to hint at historical contexts to various aspects of this chapter that are important and interesting. I also realized early in the writing that I had to avoid thinking about the constraints of a twenty-minute presentation (the time I was given by the NAASR)—although Jonathan was masterful at this short form—and simply write a piece that I hoped might honor him by not only lifting up some core ideas of his work, but by also trying to see something present, yet underappreciated, that might keep vital his presence as we proceed into the future. This chapter is what I wrote, obviously inappropriate for the occasion. I had to prepare a different paper for presentation and it, along with the other papers presented to honor Smith, will be published: “Jonathan Z. Smith and the Necessary Double-Face,” in Emily D. Crews and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds.), *Remembering J. Z. Smith: A Career and Its Consequences* (London: Equinox, in press).

⁶ The sock and buskin are two ancient symbols of comedy and tragedy. In Greek theater, actors in tragic roles wore a boot called a buskin (Latin *cothurnus*) that elevated them above the other actors. The actors with comedic roles only wore a thin-soled shoe called a sock (Latin *soccus*). Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, is often depicted holding the tragic mask and wearing buskins. Thalia, the muse of comedy, is similarly associated with the mask of comedy and comics’ socks. Some people refer to the masks themselves as “sock and buskin.”

⁷ So far as I can tell, the shaping of Smith’s most expansive and creative understanding of comparison has not been linked, more than incidentally, to his early work on Frazer despite Smith occasionally suggesting its importance.

⁸ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 47.

⁹ The third and most commonly cited edition has the subtitle *A Study in Magic and Religion*.

¹⁰ Smith, “Chips,” 51 n. 75. I believe that Smith did a great deal of research on the history of comparison as part of his dissertation research. It appears to an extent in Part III, “Frazer Redivivus?,” of his dissertation, but more fully in his 1971 article “*Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit*,”

is rare among those who are interested in Smith's studies of comparison to mention his studies of Frazer, I find therein important insights into Smith's expansive understanding of comparison,¹¹ especially the yet-to-be-developed implications caught by Smith's phrase "the necessary double-face."

It is my intention to honor and contribute to Smith's work, his most fundamental insights as I see them, and his style. It is vital to recognize that Smith considered comparison essential to a proper academic study of religion. It is important to take seriously his appreciation of the creative energetics of jest and riddle, for herein is the key to his most profound understanding of comparison. We must resist the overwhelming detail and the seemingly exotic topics Smith often wrote about.¹² His requisite profusion of extensive footnotes—offering something of distinct yet entwined dual narratives—makes present in his style the double-face that Smith considered necessary. Like Frazer, he was deeply committed to engaging those questions that may have no answers yet in their asking energize our vitality; foremost the absurdity of the human condition, the efforts to overcome the "real death" by death itself, or even the enterprise of comprehending something so laughably strange, yet humanly distinct, as religion.

first published in *History of Religions* 11 (1971): 67–90; reprinted in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 240–64.

¹¹ In the autobiographical essay "Chips," Smith explains the awakening of his early interest in the importance of comparison.

By 1963–64, the problematics of comparison emerged as the place at which I could bring together responsibility to specific languages and histories with the philosophical issues concerning culture, religion, and language that I found most interesting. . . . I began a program of systematic reading in the history of comparison in the study of religion and in anthropology, abstracting both premodern and modern texts.

At the same time, I began to think about a dissertation that would use Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as a "laboratory for comparison." The problem was the right one; but Frazer, as I already knew while drafting the dissertation, was the wrong choice. . . . He offers no answer to the question, how shall we compare? (8–9)

¹² While Smith's principal area of study was Judaism in early Christianity, he often explored exotic and little-known materials such as the Babylonian Akitu (New Year's) festival, West Ceremese Hainuwele myth and associated cargo cults, the Arrernte in Central Australia, and the Bororo of Brazil, among many others.

Smith and “the Necessary Double-Face”: The Impact of the Frazer Studies

In his 1973 *History of Religions* journal article titled “When the Bough Breaks”¹³ Smith invokes the most provocative line in the lullaby “Rock a Bye Baby.”¹⁴ His clever title points, with a surprisingly ominous tone, to his subject, James George Frazer’s classic work *The Golden Bough*, published in three editions from 1890 to 1915.¹⁵ This enormous work was the subject of Smith’s 1969 Yale doctoral dissertation, “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*.” Smith’s article title characteristically teases us with the most enigmatic lines from this seemingly sweet lullaby,¹⁶ “when the bough breaks / the cradle will fall / and down will come baby / cradle and all,” the image of a seeming tragedy due to a broken branch.¹⁷ It is certainly not the sentiment to soothe one to sleep or to ensure that Smith is about to reveal

¹³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” *History of Religions* 12, no. 4 (1973): 342–71 and also in Smith’s *Map Is Not Territory*, 208–39. Page citations are to the latter.

¹⁴ Many theories account for the origin of this lullaby. There is much discussion of its early publication and the sources, as well as the longer history of it as a sung lullaby. There are many versions, often varying most on the concern of the falling baby. Some versions suggest that the baby falls when the wind blows the cradle, with no reference to any breaking bough. Some interpretations indicate that the reference to the fallen baby is to laying a baby down upon going to sleep aided by rocking it. I find it delightful that the most common version today is that alluded to by Smith that includes the broken bough and the falling of baby and cradle. As it appeared in its first published form in 1765 in *Mother Goose’s Melody*:

Rock a by Baby
On the Tree Top,
When the Wind blows
The cradle will rock
When the cradle rocks
The baby will fall,
and down will come Baby,
Cradle and all.

The most common version used today is this:

Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetop,
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and all.

¹⁵ The first edition was published 1890 in two volumes; the second edition was published in 1900 in three volumes; the third edition was published in twelve volumes from 1911 to 1915. Frazer also published an abridged edition in 1922 and eventually in 1936 *Aftermath: A Supplement to the Golden Bough*.

¹⁶ The earliest print version in London, 1765, has the lyrics as “when the cradle rocks / the baby will fall,” indicate the rocking cradle lulling the baby to fall asleep.

¹⁷ Some years ago, during a heavy snowstorm I had hurried from my classroom to my car to head home. Just as I opened my car door a large branch broke from a tree above me. It fell just inches from me with the sharp end piercing the ground beside me. A mere few inches separated me from a likely demise. The incident left me with an unforgettable experience of the fragility of our lives and the constant presence of our end. It gave urgency to the life-and-death associations of a broken bough.

the wisdom of this classic. Smith's title hints that his evaluation of *The Golden Bough* will find it "broken," and we wonder, in this seeming analogy, about the identity of the fallen baby cradle.¹⁸ Is it specifically Frazer's failed scholarship, the broken comparative enterprise, or the tragicomedy of the whole academy? Smith's four-word title invoking a centuries-old folk lullaby offers at once riddle and dark joke as clues that anticipate Smith's study of Frazer and also some core concerns and style elements that persist across Smith's long career.

At its base Smith's study is to discern and evaluate Frazer's objective and his argument. Smith attended to the detail of Frazer's own statements of purpose¹⁹ as well as the development and execution of his argument based on Smith's thorough analysis of Frazer's presentation of his sources across all three editions. Much of Smith's dissertation is devoted to the detailed analysis of how Frazer selects, categorizes, and compares the cultural examples to construct his argument. To accomplish this analysis Smith read the original sources for Frazer's thousands of examples and compared each as presented by Frazer with its source to determine which among several options applies: Does Frazer present his source accurately? Does he significantly misrepresent the source? Or, more frequently than we'd have expected, does he somehow concoct the example? How does Frazer's mode of comparison, including his selection of exempla, reveal his intentions? Smith's presentation of his results is often long and tedious, even statistical.²⁰ Such a task for the

¹⁸ And I suppose we might also consider the identity of the agency of the breaking, including Smith himself.

¹⁹ Smith comparatively examines statements made by Frazer across the three editions of *The Golden Bough* in an effort to determine what at least Frazer thought he was doing (Smith, "When the Bough Breaks," 208–12).

²⁰ It is important to provide detail here to appreciate the scope and effort of Smith's use of this method; I'll refer to this method as *limited objective comparison*, which I'll develop further in chapter 5. The third edition of *The Golden Bough* includes a five-thousand-item bibliography, and Smith estimates that the many volumes include some one hundred thousand culturally identified items ("Glory, Jest, and Riddle," 416). Smith states that his "preparation for the Frazer work was reading every item cited in the footnotes of his third edition" (Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 124). Smith's efforts were often exacting and exhaustive, as in the following representative summary passage:

Frazer, in advancing his thesis of sacril regicide, lists seventeen African tribes which he claims killed their kings when they grew old, inform [*sic*] or impotent. A review of his evidence established that while there were instances of regicide in all seventeen tribes, in eight of them, the "kings" did not appear to be slain for the reasons Frazer suggested. In four tribes, Frazer's interpretation conclusively holds: the kings were slain for the reasons Frazer postulates; Frazer's evidence can be augmented by more recent reports and his conclusions are supported by more recent scholarship. In four other tribes it is probable that Frazer was correct. He accurately reproduces the data, but there is not additional material beyond that which Frazer utilized. In one, the evidence was too scanty to permit evaluation. Seventeen

formidable *The Golden Bough* is a work that should take a lifetime rather than being the topic of a dissertation, although Smith did say that he spent six years on the project.²¹ Yet something of the measure of Smith's intellect is that

tribes, eight of which are certain or probable, is about 50 percent average. On the other hand, subsequent scholars have listed another eighty-five tribes for which sacral regicide has been claimed. Only ten of these have checked out as being certain or probable. ("Glory, Jest, and Riddle," 418)

Unfortunately, I think this style and method, which includes such enormous detail of often esoteric materials in a radically critical light, has been off-putting to some readers and has led to the underappreciation of some aspects of Smith's work. I discuss comparatively Smith's and Eliade's "styles" in *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, and Histories in Central Australia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 209–10, suggesting that the difference in style has meant that Eliade tends to be much more accessible, thus influential, than Smith. Russell McCutcheon provides examples of and insights into this aspect of Smith's work in his "Introducing Smith," in Braun and McCutcheon, *Introducing Religion*. He offers a number of examples of the measure of Smith's attention to detail and insightfully notices the penchant of many religion scholars for

getting lost in the details and failing to understand the larger project of which Smith's essays are merely "e.g.s" playing the role of heuristics helpful in illustrating a wider point. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, for whatever reason, for many in our field today citing Smith has become a ritual gesture. . . . Much like buying an indulgence, citing Smith on the invention of religion has become a genuflection, a disciplined act of deference that, once accomplished, allows one to go about doing what one was already intending to do—which is pretty much how Smith himself has often critiqued those who, in the opening of their books, discuss the importance of defining religion yet, after acknowledging the difficulties entailed by this project, proceed either as if no definition was required or as if the participant's own self-understanding was sufficient for setting the scholarly table. (7–8)

It is rather remarkable that in the thirty-one essays that comprise *Introducing Religion*, despite the subtitle *Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, most do little more than offer a quick genuflection to Smith in the opening paragraph, never to mention him again; more than a few make no reference to Smith at all. In my reading of the volume, only Burton Mack (other than the volume editors) has deep insight into the full measure of Smith's contribution. I had a similar sense of disappointment in reading the recent collection of interviews of Smith in Braun and McCutcheon's *Reading J. Z. Smith*. While the two initial interviews of Smith were entertaining and interesting, they were conducted by persons who had little or no understanding or knowledge of Smith's considerable accomplishments. This is not a criticism of Braun and McCutcheon, but rather a response to what seems representative of an odd shallowness in the appreciation of Smith, especially in light of the frequent acknowledgment that he is the most influential scholar of religion in a generation.

²¹ Smith, "Chips," 9. On a number of occasions, I enjoyed Jonathan's delightful stories of his friend and colleague, Jacob ("Jack") Neusner (1932–2016). I recall his humorous accounts of the near monthly receipt of Jack's latest publication. Jonathan spoke of his wife Elaine hiding these packages, knowing how they would affect Jonathan, seemingly overwhelmed not only by their extent, but by comparison to his own production. Yet, of course, his output would be considered by anyone reasonable as prolific. This seems laughable, yet there is the fact that Neusner published more than nine hundred books in his career; that amounts to fifteen books a year for sixty years, or a book a month. Most who knew Jack have their own stories. I once received a letter from him praising one of my books. I was, of course, delighted, yet wondered if the book actually deserved the praise. A couple days later another letter arrived from Jack informing me that, on further reflection, he thought the book to be seriously flawed. I was relieved . . . and honored. I recall at an AAR meeting seeing Jack. I had a book in my hand when we met and he took it from me as we started our brief conversation. As we chatted I noticed that Jack was turning the pages of the book as rapidly as he could. In a few minutes he handed the book back to me and gave me his critical comments on it, including references to passages that he identified by page number.

he had read the unabridged edition of *The Golden Bough* before he started high school.²²

We would expect that, first published in 1973, Smith's "When the Bough Breaks" essay would draw heavily on his recently completed dissertation. Indeed, the essay is, based on my comparative analysis, an abridged presentation of Part I, "*Homo Ludens*, Frazer as Play," of his dissertation with emphasis on chapter 4, "No Answers, No Questions."²³ Smith begins "When the Bough Breaks" by invoking the famed scene that inspired his dissertation chapter title. It is notable that Smith does not quite accurately quote the exchange as Alice B. Toklas described it in her biography.²⁴ In Smith's version, Gertrude Stein, on her deathbed, asked her good friend, "What is the answer?" When Toklas responded, "There is no answer," Stein sank back and murmured, "Then there is no question!"²⁵

From the beginning of his work it seems that Smith, like Frazer and Stein, has been practicing and also preparing to face death, the "real death," "no figurative or allegorical death, no poetical embroidery thrown over the skeleton, but the real death, the naked skeleton." He has now done so,²⁶ leaving

²² Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 48.

²³ Smith indicated ("Chips," 38 n. 29) that he understood it to be an abridged version of Part I.

²⁴ In the 1940s, Gertrude Stein was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer. Her last exchange with her partner, Alice B. Toklas, was notable. While in a hospital in Neuilly, France, Stein regained consciousness for just a few minutes following surgery, during which she asked, "What is the answer?" When Toklas failed to reply, Stein laughed and said, "In that case, what is the question?" Stein soon fell into a coma and died later that day, on July 19, 1946. Alice B. Toklas, *What Is Remembered* (New York: North Point Press, [1963] 1985). I've seen other versions of this famous quotation. I think that the Toklas version actually better serves Smith's deeper concerns. Rather than dismissing both answers and questions—"No Answers, No Questions"—it seems that the Toklas version indicates a number of possibilities. Answers alone are impossible without questions. If there is no response to "What is the answer?" then perhaps that's because there needs to be a question. Yet Toklas offered no question. Whether that is because she did not have a question or because Stein fell into a coma before the results of the surgery were determined is what we are left with. Is it a joke, a riddle? A tragedy or a comedy? Whatever it is, the pairing of answers and questions is a certainty, yet, whichever comes first or can even be articulated, it is a pairing that does not lead to some suitable resolution.

There is yet another way to imagine this riddle. As Smith concluded, Frazer was foremost concerned with death, the real death. In the Stein-Toklas exchange Stein had just regained consciousness when she asked, "What is the answer?" and she may well have been referring to the prognosis related to her illness and surgery. In other words, she might well have been asking, "Am I about to die?" We might then appreciate that her friend and companion simply might not have been able to answer because the *answer was clear!* In this scenario Stein's response is confirming of Smith's discourse on Frazer's arrival at "the necessary double-face" revealing that in the full presence of death all action is absurd. In the face of tragedy, her own death, Stein moved to comedy by then stating, "In that case [my immanent death], what is the question?" asked with a laugh before slipping into a coma and death.

Surely Jonathan would approve of my checking his source, critically evaluating his presentation, and offering an alternative.

²⁵ Smith, "When the Bough Breaks," 208. This passage also occurs in Smith, "Glory, Jest, and Riddle," 56, where he refers to the revelation as the "Stein paradox."

²⁶ Jonathan died December 30, 2017.

us not only with models and ideas, agenda and questions, but also, and more importantly, with jest and riddle, hinting at our own absurdity, yet confident that herein are the vitalizing energetics that persist beyond his and our own physical existence.

Smith concludes “When the Bough Breaks” with these words:²⁷

Frazer appears to have answered his two questions,²⁸ although we may judge his answers to be failures. . . . The original purpose of the book²⁹ was not accomplished. . . . There have been no answers because there have been no questions. . . . The *Bough* has been broken and all that it cradled has fallen. It has been broken not only by subsequent scholars, but also by the deliberate action of its author.³⁰

“The *deliberate* action of its author.” In this conclusion it may seem that Smith has resolved the riddle posed by the lullaby with the declaration that Frazer’s work is broken due to his own efforts. It would at first seem that Smith feels Frazer’s failure is due to his poor scholarship both in terms of his questionable and frequent illegitimate use of cultural examples and Frazer’s unclear and constantly changing sense of his purpose; consequently, all is fallen,

²⁷ The conclusion of Jonathan’s “No Answers, No Questions” chapter of his dissertation is worth quoting given that few have access to this work:

There have been no answers offered, and one can only conclude *à la* Stein that there have never really been any questions.

. . . Frazer concludes his preface with the phrases of a burlesque comedian:

I am hopeful that I may not now be taking a final leave of my indulgent readers, but that . . . they will bear with me yet a while if I should attempt to entertain them with fresh subjects of laughter and tears drawn from the comedy and tragedy of man’s endless quest for happiness and truth. (*The Golden Bough*, Vol. X, p. xii).

One can only “conjecture” that Frazer’s all too “indulgent reader,” who has patiently purchased volume after volume of *The Golden Bough* to find “how it all comes out,” will decide not “to bear with him” and will conclude that from one of Frazer’s comedies, there are more tears to be gained than laughter, more frustration than enlightenment. (Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 110)

²⁸ The first extended section of Smith’s “When the Bough Breaks” is devoted to what Frazer indicated in each of the editions of *The Golden Bough* as his core concern. While Smith shows that Frazer’s concerns grew, shifted, and radically changed from edition to edition, he nonetheless continued to state his purpose as answering the two questions “Why had the priest of Nemi (Aricia) to slay his predecessor? And why, before doing so, had he to pluck the Golden Bough?” Smith “When the Bough Breaks,” 208–12.

²⁹ Smith’s reading of the first edition of *The Golden Bough* found that Frazer stated his purpose as answering the question of “the meaning and origin of an ancient Italian priesthood” (quoted in Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 208) and to “explain a single rule of an ancient Italian priesthood” (quoted in Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 211–12).

³⁰ Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 238–39.

all has been lost. Yet this conclusion would be too hasty. It raises questions for most readers; at least it should. Why was Frazer's failure *deliberate*? Why would Frazer spend more than twenty-five years on this project having the intention to fail? Why did Smith engage in this enormous effort spanning half a dozen years if only to document the detail of Frazer's failure? As he acknowledges, others had made the same criticism of Frazer. Is Smith principally a fact checker and deconstructor, a curmudgeonly defender of detail? These possibilities seem inadequate measures of Smith's effort and motivation. Are we not left with a riddle or a jest, and compounded at that?

If we follow Smith's example of comparing Frazer's editions, the appended afterword³¹ to the 1978 reprinting of "When the Bough Breaks" in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* is of special interest. This afterword perhaps also echoes Frazer's *Aftermath* (1936), published twenty years after the final edition of *The Golden Bough*. In this afterword Smith writes,

I had originally intended a companion piece to this essay accounting for the reasons that Frazer chose to make his central work a joke. It was to argue that Frazer, in his researches, encountered the Savage which put the axe to his Victorian confidence in Progress and, in his studies of dying gods and kings, was brought up short before the absurdity of death. The history transcended—namely death, "no figurative or allegorical death, no poetical embroidery thrown over the skeleton, but the real death, the naked skeleton" (GB³, Vol. VII, p. vi). And, in the face of this "real death," one can only act absurdly, or, to put it another way, all action is joke.³²

The joke that is the deliberate failure is Frazer's existential engagement with death, the real death, his death, death as an aspect of being human. *The Golden Bough*, despite its many tangents interwoven throughout the bulk, was no merely academic work; it was a frenzied effort to come to terms with death.

³¹ There is a fascinating parallel here as well. In 1936, Frazer published *Aftermath: A Supplement to the Golden Bough* in which he seems to reveal that he had come to understand differently his intentions as stated in the book whose third edition had been published more than twenty years earlier. Frazer wrote, "When I first put pen to paper to write *The Golden Bough* I had no conception of the magnitude of the voyage on which I was embarking; I thought only to explain a single rule of an ancient Italian priesthood. But insensibly I was led on, step by step, into surveying, as from some specular height, some Pisgah of the mind, a great part of the human race" (quoted in Smith, "When the Bough Breaks," 211–12). Smith's afterword to "When the Bough Breaks" echoes Frazer's *Aftermath* and is more than a curiosity in that both seem to revise in quite radical terms their intentions as stated in the earlier works/editions.

³² Smith, "When the Bough Breaks," 239.

And then Smith concludes his provocative afterword with this:

I would not wish “When the Bough Breaks” to be misunderstood. Frazer, for me, becomes the more interesting and valuable precisely because he deliberately fails.³³

“Interesting . . . precisely because he *deliberately* fails.” Like Frazer, this equivalent of Smith’s second edition seems to largely reverse the conclusion of his essay as originally published.³⁴ It also compounds the riddle. We learn that the essay was but a segment of Smith’s larger project, yet this information, without the afterword added five years later,³⁵ would be known only to those who had read his dissertation and had the unlikely wherewithal to recognize how the published essay relates to that whole unpublished work; that is, being a section from his massive dissertation. Further, we learn that Smith

³³ Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 239.

³⁴ At a 1975 National AAR meeting in Chicago I asked Jonathan about “When the Bough Breaks.” I was interested in what he thought his readers should make of it. Was his intention to just “do in” Frazer? Especially at that time this was Smith’s reputation. Jonathan surprised me by telling me that he thought the world had seen enough of his work on Frazer. He told me he had taken the copy of his dissertation from the Yale University Library and that he had instructed Dissertation Reprints (the organization that makes reprint versions of dissertations available for purchase) to no longer sell his dissertation. He gave no explanation for why he thought his writings on Frazer should not be available. I wasn’t sure whether or not to take him quite at his word. Having been a student of Smith’s in many a course I fully appreciated the deep impact his research on Frazer had on his academic style and methods as well as his enormous wealth of knowledge. He had on various occasions described how he researched his dissertation. It is clear that Smith read most everything that Frazer had read in order to comprehend what Frazer was about in writing this massive work. I remember him also describing that he would take advantage of the old two-card library checkout system to learn the names of those who had read these books before him and that he would often look up these other readers for a discussion.

Upon my return home from this Chicago AAR meeting I tested Smith’s statement by attempting to order a copy of his dissertation. I was successful and, on its arrival, I devoted myself to a careful reading of it; since then I’ve consulted it again and again. Notably his dissertation remains available to order through ProQuest.

I still do not understand Smith’s distancing himself from his dissertation at that AAR meeting, yet I have long been convinced that his reading and careful study of Frazer was formative both to the approach, concerns, and energetics of Smith’s work throughout his life, and also to the broader implications of how the study of religion must in some sense impact the lives of the scholars and their readers and students. Although as my teacher Smith always seemed to me to be of the next older generation, he was in fact, only six years older than I. His recent death has served to confront me even more harshly with the questions of why we spend our lives in the study of religion—somewhat necessarily apart from, yet clearly not distinct from, the practice of religions—questions I must increasingly address in the growing presence of my own mortality and what I may leave behind (not to aggrandize it as legacy).

³⁵ I say five years later because *Map Is Not Territory* was published in 1978, thus making the afterword publicly available. However, for the record, the preface to *Map Is Not Territory* is dated “June, 1976,” presumably when the work was completed.

understands Frazer's work as a joke, yet one that centers on the most serious of all human concerns, the absurdity of being human revealed in the face of death, a subject threading, if not explicitly so, throughout Frazer's work. Even Smith's possible meaning of the term "joke" is a riddle. Does he mean the term in the sense of a humorous story or witticism or play on words, or in the sense of a dismissal due to utter unworthiness? And we are engaged by a seeming riddle with which Smith ends, that surprisingly he values Frazer "precisely because he *deliberately* fails." What? There's that sense of Frazer's intent to fail again. In this afterword, rather than tidying up and sharpening his conclusion with regard to his study of Frazer, Smith blows up any idea of conclusion by seeing Frazer's work, through three editions finally amounting to a dozen dense green-colored volumes including countless references, as amounting to a joke; as Frazer's response to facing the "real death," a response that can only be absurd. Beyond the overwhelming detail, or perhaps better, arising from the enormous effort of seemingly endless critical evaluation of mountains of detail, it is this joke, this riddle, that Smith comes to identify as capturing his interest in Frazer. This afterword signals the importance of a layer completely different from, yet attested to and revealed by, the microdetail that seems to most characterize both Frazer and Smith. This layer is, perhaps surprisingly, deeply personal and most poignant.³⁶ This layer necessarily emerges from, is earned by, the dogged effort of endless detailed comparison. Stated alone, without detail, these statements about death and human nature would be mere cliché, perhaps even maudlin.

Based on Smith's brief description of what he had planned for the second, related essay on Frazer, it would have been based on the fifth and final chapter "The Patterns of Divine Kingship" of Part II, "*Rex Sacrorum* [Sacred King]," dealing largely with the African evidence related to the killing of the sacred or divine king. We learn much later, in 2004, that Smith's title for this essay was to be "The Golden Jest."³⁷ Smith succinctly summarizes Frazer's whole project at the beginning of this dissertation chapter:

The notion of a king whose life is linked to vegetation and its vitality and who must be slain when aged lest that vitality wither away with the senescence of the king became the leading motif of the various investigations

³⁶ And I believe this most important layer has never been recognized by most of Smith's readers. Yet Smith's and Frazer's dogged fascination with detail most certainly contributes to their readers not seeing the forest for the trees.

³⁷ Smith, "Chips," 38 n. 29.

in *The Golden Bough*. Whatever little unity the whole work ultimately possesses is due to this theme and its variations.³⁸

Smith critically summarizes Frazer's various presentations on divine kingship—the killing of the divine king, the king as man-god (incarnate god or king as magician), the magician king as role-playing, the implications of the dying king with vegetation cycles,³⁹ kingship and taboo, kingship and the dying-and-rising deities—to finally arrive at a concluding section titled “The Royal Play.”⁴⁰ Invoking the example of the comparison of the Cretan bull games and the Spanish bullfight, Smith considers as playful the Cretan ritual of naked young people leaping over the horns of the charging bulls—the bull being the awesome symbol of death. This comic ritual of playing with death is contrasted by the Spanish matador who taunts death by offering himself to the horns, only in the end, in a tragic encounter, to slay death. Smith holds that while the one is comic, the other tragic, they are equally serious.⁴¹

It is in this comparative frame that Smith grapples with how to comprehend Frazer. He suggests that Frazer “combined these two attitudes. He has chosen as his subject matter the daring, tragic attempt by man to overcome death by slaying it and has chosen as his manner of approach, his style, a comic playful stance.”⁴² He then concludes the chapter with the materials I quoted at the outset of this chapter, which bear repeating.

What Frazer has sensed in *The Golden Bough* is what later philosophers have termed the absurdity of the human condition. . . . Striving to conquer death by means of death, man asserts the reality of death, its omnipresence and omnipotence, all the more strongly. It is tragic, it is comic, it is absurd.⁴³

Frazer, as the chronicler of “these efforts, vain and pitiful, yet pathetic” (*Golden Bough*, vol. IX, p. 241), adopts the necessary double-face.⁴⁴

³⁸ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 344.

³⁹ Apparently, Andrew Lang labeled Frazer's work as constituting the “vegetable” school of anthropology (Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 359).

⁴⁰ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 375–78.

⁴¹ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 374–75.

⁴² Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 376.

⁴³ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 376.

⁴⁴ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 378.

It remains unclear why Smith chose not to write this companion essay, because his conclusions to this dissertation chapter are important.⁴⁵ As is evident, I want to take this notion of the necessary double-face as inspiration for the underlying wisdom of Frazer and certainly Smith's detailed studies of Frazer's work. It captures the core dynamics of comparison as an academic method as well as a ubiquitous folk approach to the most fundamental, primary, and distinctive of human capabilities: how the two things—the items compared, for example, being at once the same as well as fundamentally different from one another—are the avenue to perception, the acquisition of new knowledge, the birth of hypotheses. As framed by Frazer throughout his massive work, this double-face presents itself wherever human beings grapple with the reality of death, yet also it is an utterly common exerciser of the distinctiveness of being human. As reframed by Smith in the technique of comparison, it is essential to a proper academic study of religion.

In my view, Smith should not only have written this second essay, “The Golden Jest,” on *The Golden Bough*, he should also have written a third one based on Part III of “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” which is titled “Frazer *Redivivus?*,” *redivivus* meaning “come back to life, reborn.” This section of a mere twenty-five pages is not only a vigorous defense of Frazer on three fronts—data, theory, and vision—it also offers essential insight into comparison and how Smith understood Frazer's failure to be both *deliberate* and also *interesting*. This section completes the jest with the resurrection of Frazer, like the rise of the next king/magician following the murder of the old one, or like the celebration of the green sprouts of next year's crop after a dark season featuring the reaper.⁴⁶

We must appreciate that the deliberateness of Frazer's failure is no final failure; it is the same sort of failure that leads scientists to new theories, or the surprises of failures that give rise to new hypotheses.⁴⁷ Perhaps, for Smith,

⁴⁵ The only clue I've found is Smith's statement in which he described adding the African material to his dissertation (the material that would have been the subject of this second essay), noting of it, “I did not find it satisfactory, and that is why I never published it” (Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 47). I regret that I never thought to directly ask Jonathan, yet my guess would be he'd not have said anything different.

⁴⁶ Not irrelevant is that Smith's first studies were those of grass, agrostology. See his “Chips,” 2. I have written much in consideration of the marvelous role of a green sprout. See my *Religion and Technology into the Future: From Adam to Tomorrow's Eve* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), especially chapter 2, “Little Green Sprout,” and chapter 3, “Fury Road.”

⁴⁷ This notion that the hypothetical inference is connected to the felt experience of surprise is developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. See my “Logic of Discovery” in *Creative Encounters*. This notion of deliberate failure might also be appreciated in the contemporary practice of issuing “beta” versions of technology. These versions precede the actual or final version (although such doesn't ever exist since there are always updates) largely because of an eagerness for failure to be detected as soon as possible

the least forgivable, as also the least interesting, was Frazer's failure to adequately comprehend and state the subjective motivations that determined his selection of data and theory. Yet throughout Smith's work, there is also, I believe, an uneasy awareness that it is the subjective, gestural, psychological experience of the scholar that ultimately determines all that the scholar does and achieves.⁴⁸ I suggest that Smith's understanding of the *deliberateness* of Frazer's failure reflects the more profound aspects of comparison as well as that of the academy at its best. The failure has to do with unidentified intentions; intentions that are most certainly subjective, silently engaged in what seems an utterly objective method: the oscillating examination of the likenesses (yet for Smith also differences) between map and territory, between one term and another, between one exemplum and another.

Smith's Frazer studies set the backdrop and groundwork for an extensive discussion of comparison. In the next sections I will present and evaluate Smith's broad considerations of comparison—classes and modes/styles, naturalness, and techniques—preparing for a concluding discussion of how joke and jest (or the structurality that they depend on) are fundamental to the more expansive importance and profundity of Smith's ideas of comparison understood in terms of the necessary double-face; ultimately most valuable (essential) to a proper study of religion.

Modes/Styles and Classes of Comparison in the Study of Religion

Sir W. Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) was a remarkable figure in the early collection of ethnographic materials in Central Australia. Trained at Oxford University as a biologist, he seemed totally surprised when he landed the position, the first he'd applied for, of establishing the first academic studies of biology in Australia. He prepared for this work on the ship voyage from Great Britain to Australia, designing the first building to house the study of biology at the University of Melbourne.⁴⁹ As a virgin territory for biological study,

and the failure itself used positively. The number of business failures is also commonly cited as the measure of a tech entrepreneur; one's value is measured in failures and recoveries.

⁴⁸ For any who know Smith's work this statement might seem outlandish and patently wrong. Yet in chapter 3, "The Ordeal of Incongruity: Jonathan Z. Smith and Experience," I will accumulate materials and evidence to argue the point.

⁴⁹ When I did research for *Storytracking* I went to Melbourne University to use its libraries but also to seek out this building. It now houses administrative offices.

the vast unexplored areas of Australia had astronomical potential. Joining the W. A. Horn Scientific Expedition in 1894 as its principal biologist and photographer,⁵⁰ Spencer traveled about Central Australia collecting and classifying specimens. He encountered Aboriginal people in his travels and treated them pretty much like biological specimens. He made an important alliance with Francis (“Frank”) Gillen (1855–1912), who was station master at the Alice Springs telegraph station, which also served as a government outpost. Together they recorded events that led to the writing of perhaps the most influential ethnographic work from Australia, *Native Tribes in Central Australia* (1899).⁵¹

Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor was Spencer’s teacher and was quite likely instrumental in getting him the position in Australia. Tylor made regular requests to Spencer for specific examples of Aboriginal behavior he needed to support the advancement of his anthropological theories. Spencer, in Melbourne, telegraphed these requests to Frank Gillen in Alice Springs, who would then provide the ethnographic examples by consulting with the Aborigines near the station. Spencer was beseeched to simply report the facts and avoid offering his own theories. Jonathan Smith’s dissertation offers an extended section on how Frazer, Tylor’s contemporary, defended the importance of his not doing fieldwork. It was based on a specialization argument that ethnography was intended to be an objective collection of data, while the armchair scholars collated, compared, and interpreted the data in conjunction with their developing theories of culture and religion.⁵²

In my work on these scholars and this history I was stunned that Spencer, a biologist, was so ill prepared to do ethnographic work. What he recorded seemed largely incidental and accidental, the collectings of a wanderer in the vastness of Central Australia. I was also amazed that some of his ethnography was literally of a collect-to-order style left to the even more untrained efforts of a telegraph station master interrogating “his Aborigines,” who were young men who did not fit well in their own cultures and sought employment by European-Australians. They were trackers, guides, stock boys, and the like. They communicated with Gillen using pidgin English, and they likely had limited knowledge of their own culture. Neither Gillen nor Spencer knew more than a little of any of the several Aboriginal languages in the area.

⁵⁰ Spencer wrote most of the published reports on the expedition.

⁵¹ For a fuller description of this history see *Storytracking*, 93–98.

⁵² Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 419–20, for Frazer’s defense of armchair anthropology.

I knew that their classic *Native Tribes*, hugely influential to the development of so much social scientific theory of the early twentieth century (and, of course, Mircea Eliade's religion theory mid-century), was the recording of a somewhat staged five-week-long performance done by a group of Aborigines as a personal favor to Frank Gillen.⁵³ The revised edition of this work, titled *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (1927),⁵⁴ was the source of one of the few cultural examples Eliade,⁵⁵ the scholar with the greatest influence on the development of the academic study of religion mid-twentieth century, commonly cited to support his theory of religion.

In "*Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit*,"⁵⁶ first published in 1971 in the *History of Religions Journal*,⁵⁷ Jonathan Smith charts four "modes or styles" of comparison as he discerned them in his reading of a vast expanse of the history of materials reflecting comparison.⁵⁸ The *ethnographic* mode was presented as prominent as we would expect. It is a technique of encountering those "not like us" as "a means of overcoming strangeness."⁵⁹ Distinctive to this mode of encounter is the effort to let the "others" speak for themselves. Smith puts it this way: "As each culture encountered is presented largely in its own terms (the *interpretatio graeca* notwithstanding), the individual items are given in the complexity of their interrelationships and not excised from their context. They are given as they appear to the observer's vision without apparent analytical mediation."⁶⁰

In the ethnographic mode, comparison is often more or less implicit and tacit. Yet the very occasion for ethnography is the presence of difference, and the descriptions can scarcely avoid the perspectives of the observer. And

⁵³ It was a fascinating day in 1993 when I climbed the hill near the Alice Springs Station to overlook the valley where, almost precisely a century earlier, Spencer and Gillen had suffered intense heat for three months while recording the events of the ceremonies that comprised the bulk of their *Native Tribes*. The station, located at a distance from present-day Alice Springs, remains as a historical site and tourist attraction. Compared to the photos from the late nineteenth century, it has changed little. I had flown from Canberra to Alice, arriving during a rare rainstorm that seemed to cover much of the area. In the days that followed, during which I roamed around to stand in the spaces of history, the desert exploded into amazing bloom. I considered it a good omen.

Spencer was present for only the last eight days of the ceremony, and it is the description of the events of these days that comprise much of *Native Tribes*.

⁵⁴ The revision was done by Spencer alone since Gillen had died in 1912. Spencer did a bit of additional fieldwork and added some sections to the book. See my *Storytracking*, 97–98, for a fuller account of this edition.

⁵⁵ Eliade was also my teacher at Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

⁵⁶ A rough translation would be "Add a little to a little and you get a lot."

⁵⁷ Smith, "Adde."

⁵⁸ Jonathan taught a course on this material that I took that was likely offered in the year or two before this was published.

⁵⁹ Smith, "Adde," 247.

⁶⁰ Smith, "Adde," 247.

these are but the surface concerns. As the example from Central Australia demonstrates, an ethnography, while appearing an objective recording of the others in their own terms (if translated to the language of the ethnographer), may be heavily shaped by widely ranging factors that are largely unknown to the reader.⁶¹ Smith puts it this way: “The ethnographer cannot escape generalization and comparison and thus cannot escape the problem of the basis for such generalization and comparison, its criteria, its extent, and meaning.”⁶²

In writing about the people indigenous to Central Australia I was faced with the subjective underpinnings of ethnographies. Since Australian Aborigines are not well known to many of my readers and also subject to wildly romanticized presentations, I wanted to present a broad outline of the distinctive characteristics of the peoples living in Central Australia at the time of contact with Europeans. Yet when I read the several standard ethnographies, I found them to vary in many critical areas. My first thought was to seek common traits among the varying accounts. Yet I soon realized that this strategy would simply add my own subjective judgment on top of many others with no principle at work other than my own, also tacit, subjective sense of what these cultures were like over a century ago. I finally decided that the only defensible way to proceed would be to present multiple ethnographies, each identified with a specific ethnographer—Spencer and Gillen’s Arrernte, Carl Strehlow’s Arrernte, and so on—knowing that my own perspective would still be operative, pretty much unknown to my readers, yet at least in a more limited way. Ethnographies are invariably the product of creative encounters, transductions of a high order, concocted fiction as much as objective record.

During my early studies of Native Americans in the American Southwest I was fascinated by Frank Hamilton Cushing (1857–1900).⁶³ As part of

⁶¹ My efforts studying the Spencer and Gillen material were intended to exhaustively trace the published work to the actual Aboriginal sources. I was able to locate field notebooks containing cursory notes taken during interviews with Aborigines. Sometimes the identities of these individuals were indicated, often not. I was able to correlate the information from these field notebooks with handwritten field journals. This process was common practice for ethnographers, who would translate or expand their field notes into narratives. I was then able to compare these journals with the published work. I learned that, in preparing *Native Tribes*, Spencer wrote up the manuscript from his journals and incorporated Gillen’s notes as well. That manuscript was sent to Macmillan in London, where it was edited prior to publication by Tylor/Frazer in 1899. I think it likely that the armchair scholars made significant changes to the manuscript, but I was unable to document these since I was unable to locate Spencer’s manuscript, which compared with the published version would have given me insight into the changes made in editing.

⁶² Smith, “*Adde*,” 249.

⁶³ Frank Hamilton Cushing, *Zuni: The Writings of Frank Hamilton Cushing*, Jesse Green (ed.) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978).

a team of ethnographers representing the Smithsonian traveling from Washington, DC, to document “the tribes” of the Southwest, he refused to camp with his fellow professional observers on a hilltop overlooking the village of Zuni. Without invitation he moved into the Zuni governor’s home. When the Smithsonian observers moved on, Cushing stayed behind and integrated himself as much as possible into Zuni life and culture. He spent so much time with them, the five years from 1879 to 1884, that they initiated him as a war priest (smart, since the war priests were tasked with interacting with the European-Americans). Few ethnographers have done so much to be able to describe another culture in “its own terms.” Even after years of immersion and being fluent in the language, Cushing still was not Zuni, and it is not difficult to detect this difference in his writings; his perspective is evident even in his literate mode of communication, that is, in the fact that he wrote descriptions of them (his literacy versus their orality).⁶⁴

One of the most important among human projects is to understand others and to do so as much as possible in their own terms, to not overwhelm by the projection of expectations on others. The alternatives available to attempt this, perhaps romantically unreasonable, effort to know and appreciate others range from imperialism and total domination to total isolation and atomization, from total immersion to some untenable ideal objectivist strategy. It is perhaps too easy to dismiss ethnography altogether because implicit comparison is unavoidable and yet always shaped by the impossible double-faced condition: “They must be like us; they are clearly not like us.”⁶⁵ In the larger frame, I believe that all comparison is founded on the powers engendered by this impossible copresence.⁶⁶

The scholarly complement to the field-located ethnographer is the armchair scholar. Frazer was Smith’s representative example.⁶⁷ The mode/class of comparison that correlates with the armchair scholars is identified by Smith as *encyclopedic*. These scholars collected the vast works of field-based ethnographers and correlated materials on various principles. I well recall Smith describing Frazer as endlessly copying materials from ethnographies

⁶⁴ And, of course, we need consult only Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Jack Goody to appreciate the impact of modes of communication, the difference between exclusively oral cultures and those that also have writing.

⁶⁵ An important work considering this issue is James Clifford and George Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁶⁶ This term is my development on Merleau-Ponty’s use of the term “copresent implication.”

⁶⁷ Smith was full of anecdotes about Frazer that he’d share in class. One story I remember was Smith’s claim that Frazer’s house collapsed (perhaps hyperbole) under the weight of his books.

into notebooks based on Frazer's own sense of what among all this diversity fit together. The sense of what goes with what (comparables) is the tricky part, and clearly for Frazer this changed as his work advanced. Frazer even described this change: "When I first put pen to paper to write *The Golden Bough* I had no conception of the magnitude of the voyage on which I was embarking; I thought only to explain a single rule of an ancient Italian priesthood. But insensibly I was led on, step by step, into surveying, as from some specular height, some Pisgah of the mind, a great part of the human race."⁶⁸ Writing *The Golden Bough* was a more than twenty-five-year process extending through three editions and growing from two volumes to a dozen; the final edition has five thousand bibliographic entries and, Smith estimated, one hundred thousand cultural examples. A price paid by the correlation of exempla is that context is mostly stripped away and adjustments of sources are made to achieve a clear sense of relatibility among exempla. Smith's great work on Frazer aimed at coming to terms with what it was that guided Frazer's identification of exempla that constituted a class and how he came to discern certain classes to begin with. The principle that comparison is not natural is more fully explored in the subsection "Naturalness: Comparison and Human Intelligence". Classes of exempla simply do not present themselves as natural categories; categories are always the invention or perception of the scholar. One service offered by the encyclopedic comparison is the amassing of vast amounts of data in ways that might then be manageable and useful to others.

Smith's efforts to find the principles that guided Frazer's encyclopedic comparisons failed to produce anything defensible or necessarily even comprehensible, although Smith offers some possibilities. He found that a loose sense of incidental association—you say "red," I respond "rose"—is perhaps the most likely. Yet Smith acknowledged that even this seemingly inadequate method led Frazer to important discoveries.

A stubborn fact remains. Frazer has, despite his failings, pointed to a large number of quite specific parallels among widely distributed peoples. . . . He has been able to demonstrate the existence, indeed created in many cases the terms for, recurrent structures in human society. . . . And he has been able to demonstrate the existence of clusters of associated motifs, of patterns which are widely distributed. . . . If we reject as outdated Frazer's

⁶⁸ Quoted in Smith, "When the Bough Breaks," 211–12.

explanation of a psycho-mental unity of mankind or the long debate in which he participated between diffusion and parallel development . . . how shall we account for this undeniable phenomenon? And perhaps more immediately, how shall we compare?⁶⁹

I also think that it is not insignificant that the encyclopedists were motivated by the necessary attempt to apprehend, if by partial construction/invention, a coherent world in the face of the enormous body of endlessly diverse cultural data being gathered and presented by ethnographers. In the nineteenth century, as ethnographers like Spencer and Cushing collected vast amounts of data presenting humankind as overwhelmingly diverse, the encyclopedist effort was to offer some unity and continuity to save some sense of the coherence among humankind. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, likely tacitly important, it was the crisis of how such a diverse world might have come to exist given that God created one world and that Adam and Eve were the parents of all.

Whatever it might be, in the fundamental sense of wanting to understand and appreciate others, the work of the encyclopedist is admirable, yet there are many concerns that accompany this mode of comparing. Smith put it this way: “The unfortunate link of the use of contextless lists held together by mere surface associations rather than careful, specific, and meaningful comparisons with the interest in exotic content has plagued the encyclopaedic tradition until the present time.”⁷⁰

While it seems from this critique that Smith holds the possibility that there might be an acceptable comparative model to support the encyclopedic mode, I don’t see that the necessary conditions could ever be adequately met. The only way to overcome the capsizing of the views of the scholar that motivate the encyclopedic project in the first place is for the scholar to already thoroughly know all of the exempla situated in their respective rich contexts, yet such a precondition could only be met by the completion of the encyclopedic work, clearly an impossibility. This conundrum is a common condition to all knowing, isn’t it? We tend to rely on something like foreknowledge—a sense of the whole while not knowing the parts or the detail—yet such foreknowledge of the whole cannot exist other than as a best guess or hunch or hypothetical inference based on personal experience; these initial motivators

⁶⁹ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 427–28.

⁷⁰ Smith, “*Adde*,” 253.

are all “feeling kinds of knowing.” What seems the fatal flaw of the encyclopedist reflects the nature of how we acquire knowledge in any sense. It is always partial; it always proceeds from a sense, however vague, of the whole; it always occurs in the midst of an ongoing presumed process; defying reason, it is an impossible copresence.

I would suggest that a contributor to our sense (pushed perhaps by Smith) of the inevitable failure of comparison is the strange linearity and contextless expectations of the use of the methods we (both academics and folk) employ; we think of comparison as a discrete action. It is as though we employ the method more or less *tabula rasa*, as though we begin with a clean slate and by employing an explicit method move from the completely unknown to the fully known. Yet the experience of the scholar (and also the folk person) never begins with nothing. The issue I address is with the unrealistic expectations of our methods. An alternative is to revise these expectations to see specific instances of our work not as a technique from moving from no knowledge or no full understanding to the truth about something or its meaning,⁷¹ but rather as an iteration in a thickly contexted oscillatory or iterative movement toward perhaps more refined inquiry (or an evolving agenda of inquiry) yet never escaping the necessary double-face, the impossible copresence that always distinguishes the energetics of the pursuit.

In the year of the death of Copernicus, 1543, Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), Belgium anatomist and physician, published a seven-volume work, *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, that contained hundreds of plates illustrating many aspects of the physical body. These plates progressively peeled back the layers of the body’s construction, isolating the various systems within the body, all the way down to the bones. The revolutionary significance of this mapping of the universe of human biology was similar to that of the Copernican mapping that replaced the earth by the sun as the center of the universe, what we now know as our solar system, the term “solar system” implying the sun as axis. *On the Fabric of the Human Body* prepared the way for the rise of comparative anatomy in the eighteenth century. It offered

⁷¹ One of Smith’s common definitional statements of religion is that it is a mode of creating and discovering meaning. After decades of trying to find some satisfaction in my work by foregrounding the search for or description of meaning, I have finally become thoroughly disenchanting with it. Given the importance I find in movement and gesture, I now prefer to see them as establishing the biological basis for feelings of coherence and incoherence. Of course, Jonathan was constantly interested in incongruity, difference, gaps, etc. I now see these as correlating with coherence. A core question for me, which I think remains closely consistent with Jonathan’s concerns, is how is it that we feel something to be coherent (fit, comparable, relatable, of a class, etc.) or not. I do not find this basis to be limited to reasoned intellectual processes.

human biology as a scientific foundation for human studies, one I believe has yet to be adequately developed—that is, at least one that avoids a simplistic and inadequate reductionism—for the study of religion and culture.⁷²

Jonathan Smith identifies comparative anatomy as the progenitor to other modes/styles of comparison, the *morphological* and *evolutionary*, that have played a role in the study of religion. Comparative anatomy is the ancestor of what was known as comparative religion, which Smith identifies as “basically an illegitimate and unreflective combination of the older morphological approach to the problems of comparison with the newer evolutionary frame of reference.”⁷³ Morphological comparison was, as Goethe outlined it, “a typological series that was fundamentally ahistorical while employing the most complex dialectic between the universal and the particular, between ideal and experience, between idea and appearance, between Being and history.”⁷⁴ In practice the morphological style of comparison arranged a series from the simplest or least developed to the complex or most developed. Technically, morphology does not implicate history or chronology, yet in a progress-oriented world, how can it not? Morphological comparison then produced such strange descriptors as “not old in chronology but in structure.” I know that at times my work has not been absent some version of this phrase.

As Smith shows, Mircea Eliade’s widely known *Patterns in Comparative Religion*⁷⁵ (1958) is exemplary of the morphological style of comparison. He summarizes morphology this way: “Comparisons within the system do not take time or history into account; comparisons between the pattern and manifestation are comparisons as in the degree of manifestation and the intelligibility and do not take historical, linear development into account. If a series is proposed, it will deal with the movement from the simple to the complex, from the perfect manifestation to the fractured.”⁷⁶ Eliade’s understanding—the perfection of creation—in a sense runs counter to the orientation of progress. Primitive cultures played an essential role in the morphological studies of religion, even though few scholars today continue to recognize this heritage and the term “primitive” and its comparables have been heavily criticized and consequently sanitized.⁷⁷

⁷² Much of my recent work has attempted to offer a biological foundation for the study of culture and religion. This chapter is certainly a part of that effort.

⁷³ See Smith, “*Adde*,” 254ff.

⁷⁴ Smith, “*Adde*,” 256–57.

⁷⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958).

⁷⁶ Smith, “*Adde*,” 259.

⁷⁷ Yet, I argue in *Creative Encounters*, especially in chapter 4, “Not by Any Name,” that the ideas indicated by these terms persist.

The other mode/style of comparison developing directly from the heritage of comparative anatomy was the *evolutionary*, which added the notion of development over time to the orderly sequence of change; this is, of course, in the lineage of Darwin. While a legitimate method of biology, when evolutionary comparison is embraced by the morphological studies of religions and cultures it produces what Smith referred to as a “muddle” that “was essentially an illegitimate combination of the older morphological approach to comparison and the newer evolutionary frame of reference. . . . The detection of simplicity now yielded historical origins (e.g., ‘the primitive’) rather than the ‘logical.’”⁷⁸ Magic preceded religion in human cultural development. It is a notable hint reflecting this style of comparison that in Spencer and Gillen’s *Native Tribes* the word “religion” does not appear in the index.

The motley hybrid that characterized comparative religion was roundly criticized and dismissed; rightly so. The unfortunate consequence for the study of religion has been the widespread avoidance of comparison of any mode/style. Perhaps also overlooked, although doubtless even less present to contemporary awareness, is the promise of the biological basis for valuable comparison as well as for the proper academic study of religion.

These four modes/styles of comparison have, as Smith documents them, played important roles in the long formal, that is academic, effort to comprehend and appreciate others, those different from us. Smith framed all of these efforts in terms of the ubiquitous binaries “man / not man” and “we/they,” crediting Robert Redfield’s essay “Primitive World View” as his source.⁷⁹ As an alternative typology of comparison entwined with his four modes/styles Smith identifies “four great classes” of comparison: cultural comparison; historical comparison; assimilation, diffusion, or borrowing; and comparison as hermeneutic device.⁸⁰ Smith’s discussion of these four classes shows that they all arise from “the living contact between two peoples, whether this contact be through travel, invasion, or trade. It is the attempt to ‘place’ one another.”⁸¹ In passing, it is important to recognize that Smith’s early studies of comparison were instrumental in shaping (or being consistent with) his ongoing career concerns with place, gap, difference, classification, and taxonomy as fundamental terminology to a proper study of religion.

⁷⁸ Smith, “*Adde*,” 260.

⁷⁹ Smith, “*Adde*,” 241. Robert Redfield, “Primitive World View,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 96 (1952): 30–36.

⁸⁰ Smith, “*Adde*,” 241–44.

⁸¹ Smith, “*Adde*,” 242.

What I'd like to add here is the argument that such fundamental binary distinctions as "man / not man" and "we/they" are based on, necessarily dependent on, the most elemental *corporeal concepts* "in/out" and "inside/outside." Philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, complemented by a number of other philosophers,⁸² has shown, quite convincingly to me, that these foundational concepts are acquired early in life through the most primary bodied experiences of coming to life, quickening, and the subtle awaking to the awareness of being alive. These are concepts acquired not through abstract intellectual processes but rather through the experiential processes of the self-moving body; thus, they are corporeal (body) concepts. I hold that our bodies comprise these corporeal concepts rather than being simply dumb bodies, mechanical meat, that at some point acquire concepts through abstract processes like filling the brain housed in the brute body with awareness and knowledge.⁸³ While it is without doubt that we do occasionally learn concepts through abstract intellectual processes, no concept is free of or could make any sense without this whole body of corporeal concepts. It is the experiential just-so-ness of these bodied concepts that comprise an operative field in which distinct items that are not identical are "felt" to be comparables—same, but different. Thus coherence—the felt sense of fit—is more fundamental than some sense of articulated meaning.

There are several important aspects to this bodied/biological perspective. The foundation of all comparison—both as suggested by Smith and by my notion of the foundational corporeal concepts that comprise our human identity—is based on, fueled by, binary oppositions in which each term cannot exist without the other. As "in" is inconceivable, either as concept or as biologically experienced place designation, without "out," so also is "we" inconceivable without "they," and so on.⁸⁴ We might rightly refer to the impossible copresence⁸⁵ of the members of these pairs as the necessary double-face. It is the structurality of comparison of any stripe. It—the embracing of impossible copresents in so many forms—is one of the capacities that

⁸² Especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Renaud Barbaras, Brian Massumi, and Michel Serres.

⁸³ These ideas are extensively developed throughout *Religion and Technology*, and they will be developed more fully in chapter 5.

⁸⁴ For a fuller exploration of this idea, see my chapter 12, "Orphans of the Sky: Outside, Movement, and Corporeal Concepts," in *Religion and Technology*, 123–34.

⁸⁵ This term reveals the influence I've long treasured of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "flesh ontology," developed especially in his essay "Chiasm" in *The Visible and Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968) where he indicated his understanding of this structurality as "the ultimate truth" (155). I have also been influenced by a similar understanding discussed by Friedrich Schiller in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York: Penguin, [1795] 2016) in his discussion of play.

distinguish us humans among our animate kin. We are biologically designed, we have evolved, to compare as fundamental to the advancement of our knowledge, as fundamental to the living a distinctly human life, yet also essential to the most quotidian acts of our perceiving the world.

Techniques of Comparison in the Study of Religion

I don't agree so much with the comparative characterization of the humanities versus sciences in the metaphorical terms of density or solidity; humanities are *soft* while the sciences are *hard*. The implications seem several: that science is the more difficult, requiring more smarts; that is, it is hard, the humanities not so much. That science produces results firmer and more reliable. That science is more defined or hard-edged, more precise and definitive. Certainly, the common associations with formulas and numbers tend to support these characterizations, perhaps in contrast to the humanities' trading in words—whose meanings are always subject to interpretation and never quite precise—and ideas and concepts that seem so hidden and abstract, or just plain vague. The real-world implications of this metaphor are many. Science is valued over humanities. Science jobs pay more than humanities jobs. STEM curricula are preferred over humanities curricula. Do the arts even rank?⁸⁶ More young people pursue science degrees than humanities degrees; the incentive is getting a good paying job. Humanists offer opinion, scientists establish fact. A strong case can be made for the shortcomings of this relative valuation.

The distinction is historically and culturally popular given the broad embrace of “informational reality”—the belief that everything can be transduced into numbers, numbers that can be electronically represented, stored, and transmitted at great distances. Artificial intelligence, social media, the ubiquity of handheld interfaces to “the All” in the cloud (post-theology), the normalized body of medicine and health (posthuman), and so on; these all confirm the near universal confidence that reality is comprised of bits (binary digits), that “bit reality” has a certain primacy. Those who create, understand, and control the formulas—or better the algorithms—and reap

⁸⁶ In Sam Gill, *Dancing Culture Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012) I attempt to show that dancing engages the most primal and fundamental aspects of being human and therefore deserves an important position in human development and education. Of course, I'm not so naive as to think such an argument will influence public educational values; yet I firmly believe it should.

the results of mining “big data” are the ones with the best jobs, the greatest wealth, and the most influence. These folks partner with the artificial intelligence that is so rapidly permeating every nook and cranny of life. My recent book *Religion and Technology into the Future: From Adam to Tomorrow's Eve* (2018) explores many of the implications of this trend, including that it isn't confined to the contemporary period.

I contend that especially in the context of overwhelming bit reality, the humanities should be of increasing importance. The trend of the diminishing interest in humanities is deeply concerning. Religion plays such a huge and pivotal role in politics, economics, and even technology (although mostly unacknowledged), yet the academic study of religion, the least among the humanities, is in decline. I suggest that one of the reasons for its decline and marginalization is that it has yet to develop a proper profile fitting to the broad concerns of the academy. Some of that failure has to do with the tenacious *religious* claims on the scholars and their work, the students who are drawn to religion, and the academic techniques and methods used. Some of that failure is in the self-isolation and overspecialization into small cadres of elites who often seem offended that there might be some broad, even practical, relevance to what they are doing.⁸⁷ Having but a little more than half a century to attempt to properly establish itself, the academic study of religion has perhaps not yet had enough time to develop into a proper study. My greater concern is that the effort to develop a proper academic study has devolved into rare marginal conversations and a shrinking sense, or even awareness, that there are any core concerns common to the field. Smith addressed this concern by saying, “I think that a field of study that cannot name its subject matter is not a field of study.”⁸⁸ My efforts here are to lift up and give emphasis to comparison, as initiated by Jonathan Smith, as an essential concern common to a proper study of religion.

Comparison must be understood, at least from one perspective, as a technique, a method, a systematic means by which to manipulate and render value to the data we choose to consider religious. The *religious* history of the field has tended to discourage discussions of academic technique, for fear

⁸⁷ I recall a visit to my home university by an Australian friend and colleague whose principal area of study was Australian Aboriginal religions. He had become interested in art, especially Asian art. He gave a lecture to my colleagues on his interest. His topic was about the relationship between art and religion, focusing on Asian examples. Although he included an extensive vocabulary of Asian terms and a rich contextualization of his chosen examples, I was stunned by how dismissive and even condescending toward these lectures were my colleagues whose specializations were in Asia.

⁸⁸ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 50.

that they might be tantamount to the rejection of the most distinctively *religious* qualities of ineffability and transcendence and spirituality and theology and hierophany. Yet for a proper academic study of religion these *religious* qualities are but possible data (or markers of data) that must be identified historically and culturally. It is not to dismiss, deny, or disparage these qualities that seem “beyond method”; but rather, they should be considered important and valued data, historically and culturally situated, to a proper academic study. Nor does attention to technique deny the value of religious studies of religion. Such studies have been occurring within many religious traditions for centuries. These studies too are potential data of interest to an academic study; they are, however, not part of proper academic studies of religion.

The argument I am making here is this: if the study of religion is to contribute to the understanding and appreciation of what we recognize as religion, both throughout history as well as in the contemporary world, then a proper academic study must be carefully articulated and it must be free of primarily religious premises. One promising way of moving in this direction is to clearly articulate academic methods and techniques.

Comparison is a technique, a method, arguably always present in any process of acquiring knowledge. Unfortunately, the technique is rarely carefully articulated or discussed, with the results being its common tacit use for unfortunate and illegitimate ends (as in the movement referred to as comparative religion) or its use becoming almost entirely tacit, invisible to extant studies (as in the atomized area studies that currently tend to dominate the field). Academic processes, common in the present-day landscape of the field of study, seem to hold that thorough description of the particular yields understanding of the general without the use of any techniques other than perhaps translation and organization. As Smith put it, “We seem still committed to the priority of species over genera, apparently confident that a focus on the former is the route to a responsible consideration of the latter without, however, much reflection on how one sort of expertise might, in fact, lead to the other.”⁸⁹ Area studies trump religion studies.

Jonathan Smith interwove comments on the technique of comparison among his various discussions, although Smith did not emphasize perhaps clearly enough his discussions as technique or argue how they contribute to the overarching study of religion as genus. I wish here to lift those up and

⁸⁹ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 126.

allow them to accumulate, in a systematic outline and critical discussion of subtopics, of comparison as technique, as method; more accurately as a cluster of related techniques and methods. To do so, I argue, is necessary to the establishment of a proper academic study of religion.

Naturalness: Comparison and Human Intelligence

The framing of all Smith's writings on comparison must be his strong declaration of its place in human intelligence. Smith begins his most detailed typological presentation of comparison, in "Adde" (1971), with these general remarks:

The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence. Whether revealed in the logical groupings of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other like activities—comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought. Without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason. . . . That comparison has, at times, led us astray there can be no doubt; that comparison remains *the* method of scholarship is likewise beyond doubt.⁹⁰

In *Drudgery Divine* (1990), upon recalling a range of synonyms and terms related to comparison, including terms like "family resemblance," "fuzzy sets," and "cluster concepts," Smith writes, "This terminology reminds us . . . that . . . there is nothing 'natural' about the enterprise of comparison. Similarity and difference are not 'given.' They are the result of mental operations. In this sense, *all comparisons are properly analogical.*"⁹¹ As a reminder, analogy is a process of transferring information from one particular to another. It is akin to what I discuss as transduction.

Smith often restates this point, as he did in the interview for the *Chicago Maroon*, the University of Chicago independent student newspaper. Smith commented,

⁹⁰ Smith, "Adde," 240–41; this is the opening passage of this essay.

⁹¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 50–51.

Comparing is doing something—bringing two things that have no reason in creation to be in the same pond together—throw them in and see what happens. . . . There’s no natural comparison. There’s no reason to put something next to something else. You decide to do that, and in a certain sense change its context, because now that context is that other thing that you brought it to.⁹²

Comparison is indeed natural, distinctive of the very nature of being human, yet the specifics that comprise a comparison, that is, the differences or similarities that make a comparison interesting and of value, are not ontological or simply objectively given by nature. Rather they are the product of the specific comparer’s interaction with the world, an act of perception as much as an act of interpretation and explanation. The technique of comparison is of the nature of human intelligence; the specifics of any comparison are the construct of the comparer and are not given by nature.

In their introduction to *In Comparison a Magic Still Dwells* (2000), a volume of articles that reconsiders Smith on comparison, editors Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray note that Smith’s statement that comparison is not natural “means that the comparativist must be acutely self-conscious of her task.”⁹³ In the academic realm comparisons are the invention of the scholar, and self-consciousness indicates a clear statement of the criteria for both seeing (perceiving) and relating objects. Yet comparison is ultimately based, not on reason, but on subjectivity, on the feeling of a connection among objects that includes both similarity and difference, rather than on some objective technique of discerning some difference/similarity that is of the nature of those specific objects. While we may insist that the analogical technique of mapping attributes of one exemplum onto another must be objective and based on reasoned argumentation, we cannot insist that the selection of the exempla and the construction of the terms of a comparison are likewise objective and based on reason. Surely this subjective base is an essential implication of comparison, one that cannot be ignored, one that is inseparable from the heuristic power of comparison.⁹⁴ It also would seem

⁹² Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 14–15.

⁹³ Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (eds.), *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 15.

⁹⁴ The only way to avoid the subjectivity that initiates comparison would require a certain objective naturalness of the characteristics distinctive to both items to be compared and some objective/reasoned analysis that these characteristics have some basis for being compared one to the other. Thus, to avoid the utter subjectivity of the initiating urge to compare requires both a naturalness and an objective comparison prior to the comparison.

that to be “acutely self-conscious” does not precede the felt sense of connection among objects to compare, but is rather a self-reflective exercise to make public the tacit subjectivity. Comparison, as technique, is unavoidably the product of creative encounter between scholar (or folk) and elements of the subject, with the results both manifestly at once the creation of the scholar and some revelation of the objects/subjects attended to in comparison.

The naturalness concern is a complicated one that might be characterizable by the necessary double-face. It is of the nature of human beings to use analogy to acquire knowledge; thus comparison is a naturally, I’d argue biologically,⁹⁵ based human method, a method that is copresent with being human. It is of the nature of human beings to classify and categorize; these too implicitly require comparison. Yet there is nothing natural about what items are acknowledged as comparable; there are no natural similarities or differences simply given by nature. Hmmm! Well, I don’t entirely believe this statement.⁹⁶ The styles and modes of relating comparables are to some extent always a product of the subjective experiences and conditionings of the comparer.⁹⁷ Thus comparison, whether of the quotidian processes of the folk or the formal processes of the academic, must be owned as initially solving *our* problems or involving *our* perceptions. Smith comments on this ownership for academics.

A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration⁹⁸ in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of

⁹⁵ It is highly popular at present to refer to brain studies to support such a claim or to refer to the works of the cognitive science of religion. Both references seem far too narrow and reductionist to be satisfying, at least to me. More satisfying are the larger, more inclusive studies of coordination dynamics that are operative throughout the body that describe the oscillating dynamics.

⁹⁶ Comparison is operative in classification and thus in the use of classification for perception and the labeling of the perceived. In the natural world, I believe, there are all sorts of given (i.e., natural) classifications that we acquire at a very early age both as corporeal concepts and as natural classifications. Comparison is, for example, an implicit yet necessary process in the identification of an object as a “dog.” Most two-year-olds can quickly identify as “dog” pretty accurately specific objects that they have never encountered before and representing an enormous range of variation. First there is the comparative distinction they must make among all the objects they encounter, including dogs and vacuum cleaners. Then there is the comparative distinction they must make among a Great Dane and Pekinese. Thus, I think nature does give us “dog” in some sense (Lakoff referred to this level of categorization as “basic level”), yet that sense is not singularly due to nature itself. I might suggest that the exempla presenting themselves for comparison arise in the process of the interrelations between the natural world and the comparer’s experience with the natural world.

⁹⁷ This conditioning might well include the “training” received in academic environments.

⁹⁸ While the phrase “disciplined exaggeration” has a certain poetic flare, I wonder if it is all that accurate. My sense is that it is utterly common, so common as to not even be foremost in one’s awareness, to engage comparison in perception, classification, metaphor, and so on. The word “disciplined” suggests a strong intentionality, yet that, even for an academic, is, in my reckoning, largely self-reflective after the fact. The reference to exaggeration leaves me wondering, what is

possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being “like” in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which we “re-vision” phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems.⁹⁹

Such a statement of the ownership of comparison speaks volumes both to the claims sometimes made that comparison is a method of establishing essences or universals for clearly it is not, and also to those postmodern critiques arguing that comparison must be eschewed as inherently (fatally?) flawed; clearly it cannot be avoided. The enterprise of any relationship with, much less understanding and appreciating of, the cultural and religious other is built on what often feels like a fundamental human dilemma. All efforts to know the other involve, at once, a presumption about the other that is at least in part a projection of self and also a difference so fundamental as to be interesting and avoid identity.

In the context of considering Jacob Neusner’s discouraging comments on the dangers of comparing religions, in large and inclusive terms Smith articulates the study of other cultures, other people’s religions, as being necessarily characterized by this fundamental dilemma. He invokes a passage from Wittgenstein to articulate it.

But isn’t *the same* at least the same? We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity in the identity of a thing with itself. . . . Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?¹⁰⁰

This is an apt, if thick, articulation of “the necessary double-face.”

While the naturalness of comparison has received little discussion, it is, in my view, at the heart of one compelling argument that it must be an essential concern of a proper study of religion. My argument goes this way. If comparison, as Smith has written, is essentially operative in the formation of “logical groupings of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other

being exaggerated? I suppose it must be predominantly that the comparer lifts up above the rest (exaggerates?) the chosen exempla. I think there is much value in understanding comparison as both utterly matter of course as well as formalizable, even if after the fact, as a powerful academic method.

⁹⁹ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” 40, in Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*.

like activities” and if, as he also says, “we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason” without comparing, then comparison is not simply a method peculiar to academic operations that may or may not be used; it is also at the formative core of identifying as religion certain sets of data connected to those others whom we study. That is, it is not some specifically academic method used only by academics; comparison is involved in perceiving, knowing, expressing actions that, when documented, inform the data we study as relevant to other (all!) people’s religions. Our subjects engage comparison in the distinctive shaping of those aspects of their culture that we identify as religious. Yet if what is compared and how the terms of comparison are related are not natural, not given as an ontological aspect of reality, not simply available directly to an outside reasonable objective observer, then it seems clear that at the heart of any proper academic inquiry must be the effort to understand the cultural, historical, and psychological factors that are subjectively operative in the formation of our subjects’ particular comparative forms, such as class, myth, ritual, language, metaphor, symbol. More than simply being self-conscious of how we, as academics, form comparisons, as Patton and Ray suggest, we must also be aware that most everything that we study as *our* subject is the result of the strange but necessary double-face of comparison, comparisons constantly engaged every day by our subjects. It is natural, it is not natural. It is objective, it is subjective. It engages us in the process of applying “what the one thing shows me to the case of two things.” It is an impossible copresence in which what *is* is also what *is not*. While we might appreciate that the technical conditions for comparison are present in the nature of all animate organisms, we surely cannot but also appreciate that it is distinctive to humans, as evidenced by our occasional awareness of and thrill at our capacities to compare and, even more, to engage comparison in the creation of the remarkable human forms—poetry, language, metaphor, and religion. Furthermore, we must be aware that the data that we have traditionally been attracted to—and in our own comparative operations identified, if tacitly—as religious are often those most magnificently shaped by this necessary double-face that is comparison: myth, ritual, scripture, theology, but also art and architecture and music and dancing. We might characterize this style of comparison with the term an *aesthetic of impossibles*.¹⁰¹ Notably the word “aesthetic” comes from Greek *aisthētikos*, from *aisthēta*, “perceptible

¹⁰¹ I have developed this idea more fully in *Creative Encounters*, especially Part III, “Aesthetic of the Impossibles.”

things,” from *aisthesthai*, “perceive.” The connection with beauty didn’t occur until mid-eighteenth century, a connection that remained controversial until the late nineteenth century. I like the idea that the impossible things are perceptible as given in some concrete perceivable forms; for example, gods as wise old men in the sky or blue many-armed figures. Thus, I intend the term “aesthetic of impossibles” to mean both the perception of impossible things and the appreciation of how amazing (beautiful) is our human biological capacity to perceive them. The holding of impossible copresents is fundamental to human life.

An enormous area needing development, should we care to appreciate the central and natural importance of comparison in human processes, is how to comprehend the cultural, historical, and psychological agencies and processes at work that result in concrete observable phenomena that are inseparable from comparison. While there are many fruitful possibilities to pursue, my personal efforts are directed toward the studies of gesture (and also human self-movement, of which gesture is a part) and the related aspects of posture and prosthesis.¹⁰² In his 2010 lecture at the University of Colorado, Smith indicated that gesture should be one of five trends he identified as important to the next generation of the academic study of religion. I’ll develop these ideas much more fully in chapter 5, “Smith’s Golden Bough.”

Uniqueness and Difference

I well remember as Smith’s student his comments on the term “unique,” and I have been brought back to them over these fifty years each time I’ve heard the word used.¹⁰³ Common usage tends toward the identification of the superlative, the outstanding, the special; he reminded us that, strictly speaking, unique means incomparable, that is, one of a kind, a class of one, not something that might be compared with anything else. To say that something is unique eliminates the possible use of comparison as a method or technique by which we might gain knowledge. Perhaps we cannot even know the truly

¹⁰² Some examples of my efforts in this respect might be found in *Dancing Culture Religion* (2012), *Religion and Technology*, and *Creative Encounters*. There is a parallel in my interests in Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of Body,” *Journal de Psychologie* 32 (1936), 366–86.

¹⁰³ In an interview Smith said, “I hate the word ‘unique,’ obviously.” Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 48.

unique since we would surely have no way of assigning it to a class or category or to distinguish it from something else.¹⁰⁴

Jonathan Smith offers a variety of legitimate uses of the term “unique,” illustrated by several literary examples. One use is the taxonomy designation that allows the classification of plant or animal, for example, to a particular place. This use of the term is common to the enterprise of classification. For greater clarity in this usage Smith prefers the word “individual” to “unique,” as in, a thing is an individual among others of its class.

In the context of religion, the term “unique” aligns with the designation of religion as *sui generis*, meaning “of its own kind.” Its use invokes the religious implications that a proper academic study of religion must avoid, as acknowledged by Smith: “The ‘unique’ is an attribute that must be disposed of, especially when linked to some notion of incomparable value, if progress in thinking through the enterprise of comparison is to be made.”¹⁰⁵ The designation “unique” correlates, is an alternative to, the designation of the religious premise, likely associated with a particular religious tradition, that cannot be avoided if used in a study of religion. Smith indicates that in this use “‘Unique’ becomes an ontological rather than a taxonomic category; an assertion of a radical difference so absolute that it becomes ‘Wholly Other,’ and the act of comparison is perceived as both an impossible and an impropriety.”¹⁰⁶ And indeed in the study of religion it derives from a particular religious tradition, namely Christianity. Smith discusses the perspectives of Burton Mack, Rudolf Bultmann, and K. L. Schmidt, among others, to convey the sense of the uniqueness of Christianity. As Schmidt put it, “‘Primitive Christianity, in general, did not enter into the World.’ Its experiences and its forms of speech are, hence, by definition incomparable.”¹⁰⁷ Or in Mack’s words, “The fundamental persuasion is that Christianity appeared unexpectedly in human history, that it was (is) at core a brand-new vision of human existence, and that, since this is so, only a startling moment could account for its emergence at the beginning. The code word serving as a sign for the novelty that appeared is the term unique (meaning singular, incomparable, without analogue).”¹⁰⁸ Eliade’s terminology of hierophany implicates that

¹⁰⁴ There is considerable evidence that since perception necessarily engages comparison, the truly incomparable, that is, the truly unique, would simply not be perceived.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 38. Smith noted, “From an historian’s viewpoint, to cite Toynbee [A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 12:11], ‘This word “unique” is a negative term signifying what is mentally incomprehensible’” (*Drudgery Divine*, 42).

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 40.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 38–39.

sense that religion breaks unexpectedly and without cause into this ordinary reality, a unique appearance.¹⁰⁹

With Christianity as the model and lineage inherited in the enterprise of establishing a proper academic study of religion, the explicitly Christian theological notion designated by the word “unique” informs the efforts to express distinctive criteria for the general class term “religion.” The result makes impossible a proper study of religion. Smith summarizes: “What is required is an end to the imposition of the extra-historical categories of uniqueness and the ‘Wholly Other’ upon historical data and the tasks of historical understanding. . . . What is required is the development of a discourse of ‘difference,’ a complex term which invites negotiation, classification and comparison, and, at the same time, avoids too easy a discourse of the ‘same.’”¹¹⁰

In the straightforward terms of method or technique, comparison is impossible if there is a premise (necessarily *religious* in kind) that the subject studied is unique, *sui generis*, Wholly Other, incomprehensible, ineffable. The default for comparison, operating in this religious context, is but to identify sameness, an empty strategy that effectively can only say, “This (any designation as religious) too is incomparable.” Smith’s requirement for a useful and valued technique of comparison in the study of religion is to develop a discourse of difference, and this technique is impossible if the exempla are considered unique.

Compare, to What End?

The prominent comparative technique used by Smith in his studies of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* was the direct holding together of a specific description of a cultural exemplum and its appearance in the source for the item that Frazer identified. This form is also the comparative technique I used for much of my work on Eliade’s and Smith’s studies of nineteenth-century Australian Aboriginal material. This technique might be called “source criticism” and is a broadly used and rather standard type of academic comparative technique. For decades my students grew weary, I’m sure, of my constantly

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, Eliade, *Patterns*, 1, and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 21.

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 42.

beseeking them to “check the sources.” The method has an immediate end and the results are typically definitive within limitations. It is on the order of the common parlance used today of “fact checking.” Is the statement used accurately in terms of its source?

However, though it produces definitive results, this comparative technique is usually not an end in itself. The tacit premise that actually motivates the use of the technique is the high expectation that the method will reveal differences. Should all scholars practice exacting precision in presenting the evidence from their primary sources,¹¹¹ there would be no point at all to doing this comparison. In revealing differences this form of comparative method yields evidence about the intended purpose or argument or theory that the author and work are attempting to establish. It often, as was the case in my Australian studies, yields narrative about the authors studied (perhaps more so than their subjects). Smith discovered more about Frazer perhaps than he did about the actions of the ancient priests at Nemi; I discovered more about Eliade and Smith than I did about the religious actions related to poles of the nineteenth-century Aborigines in Central Australia.

That comparison not be considered an end in itself is linked strongly to Smith’s insistence that it is difference that is essentially important in comparing. He stated this succinctly in *To Take Place*, a passage that he (and so many others) often quoted.

It is axiomatic that comparison is never a matter of identity. Comparison requires the acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting, and a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end. The questions of comparison are questions of judgement with respect to difference: What differences are to be maintained in the interests of comparative inquiry? What differences can be defensively relaxed and relativized in light of the intellectual tasks at hand?¹¹²

In Smith’s studies of Frazer, finding the differences between Frazer’s exempla and their respective sources is surely implicated in Smith’s statements that he found Frazer interesting because he failed, and did so

¹¹¹ It might be argued that any quotation of a source is a selection made by asserting value and any paraphrasing or other sort of presentation of a source example cannot be free of the implications of value added (or subtracted). Thus, no use of sources, short of a total replication (duh!), will reveal differences.

¹¹² Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13–14. Also quoted in Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 47.

deliberately. Doesn't this suggest that Frazer was adjusting his sources toward some end? Doesn't such a condition demand a story? These stories arise from the exploration of the context and effect of the differences revealed through the use of comparison. These are the stories of the creative encounters that constitute scholarship.

When Ann Taves, then president of the American Academy of Religion, introduced Jonathan Smith on the occasion of his plenary lecture "Reading Religion: A Life in Learning" (2010), she referred to Smith's contribution to the articulation of comparison, describing it in terms of a linear and rational sequence of four stages: description, comparison, redescription, reconciliation. Taves recognized the importance to the proper academic study of religion of Smith's contribution to comparison, which she described as "a procedure for taking the past seriously, treating it respectfully, and at the same time, in stressing our role in setting up comparisons, providing a means of rethinking the categories that have traditionally informed the study of religion."¹¹³ This version of comparison is articulated in Smith's essay titled "The 'End' of Comparison" that concluded the collection of essays edited by Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells* (2000).¹¹⁴ Of this understanding of comparison Smith writes,

The "end" of comparison cannot be the act of comparison itself. I would distinguish four moments in the comparative enterprise: description, comparison, redescription, and rectification. Description is a double process which comprises the historical or anthropological dimensions of the work: First, the requirement that we locate a given example within the rich texture of its social, historical, and cultural environments that invest it with its local significance. The second task of description is that of reception-history, a careful account of how *our* second-order scholarly tradition has intersected with the exemplum. That is to say, we need to describe how the datum has become accepted as significant for the purpose of argument. Only when such a double contextualization is completed does one move on to the

¹¹³ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 112. I can't comprehend why Taves seems to identify comparison in this statement principally as concerned with the past and with rethinking. Such a view tends, as I understand it, to be a method or technique confined to the self-referential field discourse; comparison is far more powerful than reflecting on the history of the field of study.

¹¹⁴ Professor Patton indicated to me that Jonathan strongly resisted writing this essay for the volume. I think it possible to see evidence of his reluctance in the essay. I think it unfortunate that, since Smith here sets out a linear, seemingly rational method of comparison, this particular articulation of comparison has come too often to be considered by many scholars as Smith's core understanding of comparison as technique.

description of a second example undertaken in the same double fashion. With at least two exempla in view, we are prepared to undertake their comparison both in terms of aspects and relations held to be significant, and with respect to some category, question, theory, or model of interest to us. The aim of such a comparison is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined.¹¹⁵

Smith's extended description appears at first to be a clear and complete technical description of comparison as an academic method, a four-stage process with subdivisions within some of the four moments of operation. The shortcoming, however, is that as Smith presents a description of what he terms the "comparative enterprise," only one of the four moments is identified as the actual act of comparing, the analogical mapping of traits of paired exempla. With respect to the technical details of comparison itself, Smith mentions "comparison both in terms of aspects and relations held to be significant, and with respect to some category, question, theory, or model of interest to us." The technical operations implied by this complex process are significant, yet left unaddressed.

Comparison has to be prepared for by delimiting the two or more exempla to be compared by actions of description; description is a form of transduction with implicit comparison. The actual formal comparing then focused on aspects and relations. By aspects Smith is likely indicating corresponding distinctive features of the specific exempla, something on the order of features of one exemplum that are like in some respects features in another exemplum. Yet Smith has warned us that to be interesting these cannot simply be identities (such would yield tautology). Using the word "relations," Smith is likely seeing an exemplum as usually comprising not simply a single aspect but rather a collection of aspects that are related to one another in some respects. Thus, these relations among aspects may themselves be recognized as being like in some respect, but not others, the paired exemplum. Again, Smith has warned that these relations cannot simply be identical.

Even with these specifications of this rather linear form of comparison, there remains the issue of how to control and identify the terms "aspects" and "relations," for surely how one focuses on recognizing these fundamental

¹¹⁵ Smith, "The 'End' of Comparison," 239. For an example of the application of this method that Smith cited see Burton Mack, "On Redescribing Christian Origins," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 247–69.

terms totally determines the outcomes of the comparison. Smith notes that aspects and relations are the product of “category, question, theory, or model.” Surely these framing distinctions are also operative in constructing the descriptions that precede the actual comparing. Each of these four framing criteria is complex in itself; each implicates history, discipline, paradigms, definitions, classifications, cultures, and so much more, all themselves the products of the ongoing engagement of the comparative enterprise.¹¹⁶

Making an important technical point about comparing, Smith addressed our habit of stating comparison as a matter of the likeness of two things.¹¹⁷ Smith’s insistence on difference is perhaps called for because of the long history, still prominent, of that common sense of surprise that the other is somehow like us! The surprising experience that those so different may not be after all—in some respects, at some levels—is itself an adequate end. The experience may have a short-term feeling of comfort, yet it invariably limits the worlds of others to those things that mirror ourselves.

Should we be interested in difference, and we must, our practice has been to add “and contrast” to the verb “compare.” But Smith’s insistence on the importance of difference is but part of this technical point. It is not a method involving but two elements. Importantly, Smith insisted that “comparison is never dyadic, but always triadic; there is always an implicit ‘more than,’ and there is always a ‘with respect to.’ In the case of an academic comparison, the ‘with respect to’ is most frequently the scholar’s interest.”¹¹⁸ The importance of this triadic structure to the technique of comparing is that it recognizes the “scholar’s interest” as an unavoidable, yet I should hope positive, dynamic of the method.

Smith frequently proclaimed that the choices that limit and specify these four framing criteria determine all that follows. Thus, he required that we be “relentlessly self-conscious.” These choices are hinted at by Smith’s phrases “held to be significant” and “of interest to us.” I cannot see how these seemingly insignificant and nontechnical phrases are not actually the most fundamental features of the entire comparative enterprise. Category, question,

¹¹⁶ I do not understand Taves’s seeming framing Smith’s view of comparison as focused on “taking the past seriously” in the rethinking of categories traditional to the study of religion. While Smith insisted on being relentlessly self-reflective, he surely would not think of comparison as limited to or even primarily concerned with self-referential theory. The exempla necessarily brought into comparison are primarily those of the religions of the others on whom we direct our attention.

¹¹⁷ Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 237–38, gives excellent overview of the penchant of Western thought to see comparison as sameness.

¹¹⁸ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51.

theory, and model are all then determined by the utterly subjective and nontechnical processes by which significance and interest actively inform choices, for example, Frazer's abiding concern with real death. I will return to the subjective and experiential aspect of Smith's work in chapter 3, "The Ordeal of Incongruity: Jonathan Z. Smith and Experience."

The third stage of this enterprise is "redescription," which seems but the formalization, the rewriting, of the identification of "aspects" and "relations" and results of the mapping back and forth between the exempla with respect to these aspects and relations. The fourth stage, "rectification," must surely be but another face of the formalization of redescription where the insights gained through the mapping back and forth among the exempla in terms of aspects and relations address the implications for the category, question, theory, or model that has shaped and guided the descriptions and comparative mappings.

The effort to take Smith seriously as presenting a technique, a method, that might be applied in a systematic and utterly objective way reveals much of importance not only about the "comparative enterprise" but also about the very nature of "technique and method." It is perhaps a common perspective that it is desirable to have a rational linear process comprising four stages that, if followed precisely and with objective reason, produces an end result—such as truth, knowledge, understanding, perhaps meaning. This approach seems quite scientific and thus, in our cultural milieu, positive for humanists. After all, what good are the demands of technique and method if they don't ensure these measurable replicable gains? Surely such rigorous processes are necessary for the establishment of a proper academic study of religion.

Yet what is discovered by pushing Smith's seeming linear and rational criteria toward the full extent of their implications when rigorously applied is that the linear is at best an iteration of an ongoing oscillating and repetitive process. Further, rather than being a rigorous, totally objective technique producing definitive results rationally defensible, the comparative enterprise cannot be free of the broadly subjective and deeply determinative presence of what *we* hold, prior to and outside of the comparison, to be significant and of interest to *us*.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ I advocate that we must always see any method or technique as being used in a complex cultural and historical, and also often professional, context. So if comparison is set in the history of a particular well-established academic tradition (or "school"), it appears closer to being an objectively, rather than a subjectively, based method. A generation (age-set) or school comprising a number of scholars who have engaged in careful critical discourse over time establishes the grounds for specific uses of technique and method. These schools tend to be defined by their methods and

Quite often Smith identified these unavoidable features of comparison, of technique and method themselves, in the terms of “failure.” Smith recognized that Frazer’s limited and often changing sense of what he was about heavily influenced *The Golden Bough* and resulted in no real and specific gains (or that the gains are somehow accidental or inexplicable in terms of method applied); if there are no questions, there can be no answers. Smith recognized that Eliade’s sense of the patterns that comprise religion—what I consider to be an academic theology—overwhelmed the way he selected and described his exempla, in effect nullifying the required independence that is the power of primary sources.

It would seem that asking the question regarding the end of comparison only takes us to the riddle (or perhaps joke) of the word “end” itself; end as the promising outcome or end as the cessation of the use of the method due to its failure. It is too easy, I believe, to read Smith’s articulation of his analyses of Frazer and Eliade in the terms of “failure” as an indication that he either considered their versions of the comparative enterprise to be wholly inadequate or that he considered the comparative enterprise itself as useless to a proper academic study of religion.¹²⁰

Smith’s strong criticism of Frazer’s and Eliade’s comparative efforts, his proclamation of them as failures, may well have, unintentionally I believe, discouraged the use of comparison in the study of religion.¹²¹ There is perhaps a parallel between the impact of Smith’s critical discourse on comparison and

their techniques, and the character and shape of their results is predictable. This phase of scholarship is perhaps what Thomas Kuhn referred to as “normal science” in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

¹²⁰ At the AAR meetings honoring Jonathan in Denver (November 2018), several papers focused on comparison. I was rather surprised that they tended to see comparison largely in terms of a questionable method. In the discussion I especially recall one young scholar asking the panel if they thought there remained any place at all for comparison in the study of religion. I found these reflections on comparison rather disturbing in light of the importance of comparison in the development of a proper academic study of religion.

¹²¹ Bruce Lincoln is an interesting example of one discouraged about comparison by Jonathan. In his *Apples and Oranges*, Lincoln tells of going to Chicago in 1971 to study the history of religions. Having read Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, he says that he considered Mircea Eliade the closest living equivalent. Due to Eliade’s ill health at the time, he was directed to Jonathan Smith for program and faculty advice. As he tells it: “Asked about my projected course of studies, I voiced interest in comparative work. ‘Comparison is over,’ Smith responded bluntly. ‘You need to get serious and specialize.’ Undaunted, I persisted. Rather than ask the reasons for his pronouncement, I sought an exception to his verdict. Surely, there must be some way to do comparison that would meet whatever objections he harbored? ‘Only one,’ he replied and pointed me toward Indo-European linguistics.” Lincoln then tells of his experience when Eliade was again available. “When I finally approached Eliade, he welcomed me warmly and supported my efforts, encouraging me to learn more languages, read more broadly, and expand my comparative horizons. Finding his enthusiasm more inviting than Smith’s skepticism, I moved in his direction.”

that advanced in 1896 by Franz Boas's "The Limitations of the Comparative Method in Anthropology." Both had the effect of discouraging comparison as an academic method. Yet Smith wrote of Boas, "Let it be perfectly clear, for this was immediately misunderstood and misrepresented by some of Boas' American colleagues—Boas did not reject the comparative method. . . . He sought to improve the method, to tighten up the criteria by which similarities were determined and on which comparisons might be made."¹²² The same must also be said of Smith. He did not reject the comparative method, he sought to improve it. After all, who more than Smith has devoted so much study to, so many writings to, comparison as an essential method for a proper study of religion? While a number of the articles collected by Patton and Ray for *In Comparison a Magic Still Dwells* attempted to retain comparison as

It seems Lincoln's discouragement may have contributed to what to me might have been a missed opportunity for Lincoln to understand more fully Smith's contributions to comparison. It is also possible that Smith was not damning comparison as an essential method for the academic study, but rather might have been sensing Lincoln's intention to engage comparison on the scale of Frazer and Eliade. Given this understanding, he doubtless did believe that such an enterprise was one based on the assumptions of an underlying equality or similarity (not difference)—what I often call Eliade's academic theology—and it would have been appropriate for him to refer to this kind of comparison as being over. Writing in 2018 after Smith's death, Lincoln describes Smith's work of fifty years earlier this way: "Having recently completed a dissertation demolishing Frazer, Smith was turning his critical energies to Eliade's methods and theories." Of course, Lincoln had read Smith's many writings on comparison, including "When the Bough Breaks." He likely had read Smith's dissertation on Frazer and comparison in which the last section of the work, "Frazer Redivivus?," praises Frazer and his accomplishments. Despite whatever Lincoln remembers as Smith's dismissal of comparison altogether, Jonathan certainly didn't take the advice himself, writing many articles (post-1971) and at least one book on comparison that explored it in depth. Yet, as I am suggesting here, Smith did tend to criticize certain aspects of the comparative enterprise, and some, like Lincoln, may have misunderstood Smith. Smith was well aware of this possibility as evident in his discussion of Boas's misunderstood writings on comparison, which I'm about to review. Recall that the final sentence in Smith's afterword to "When the Bough Breaks," written and published surely after his encounter with Lincoln, states, "I would not wish 'When the Bough Breaks' to be misunderstood. Frazer, for me, becomes the more interesting and valuable precisely because he deliberately fails." This statement does not support Lincoln's assessment that it was Smith's intention to demolish Frazer or Eliade either, which I think Lincoln implies. See "Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion," chapter 4 in this volume, which considers their encounter.

The edginess of Lincoln's tone recounting his encounter with Smith almost fifty years later, written even after Smith's death, is fascinating to me. As I have written recently in *Creative Encounters*, all encounters are creative, even those that we experience as painful and difficult. It is fairly evident that Lincoln's encounter with Smith shaped his career in significant ways, if motivated by his defiance of what he felt Smith was communicating; much of it despite what I believe is extensive evidence that, whatever Smith said, he has been one of the great modern students of comparison. It also is fascinating and important to me, as I'll discuss in chapter 3, "The Ordeal of Incongruity: Jonathan Z. Smith and Experience," that, as Smith showed in his Frazer study, personal emotional concerns are often the most powerful motivators, if usually tacit, for academic work.

¹²² Smith, "Glory, Jest, and Riddle," 412; Smith closely replicates, without citation, this passage on Boas in his "Adde," 262–64. The date of the first publication of "Adde," which was in 1971, and this replication of a passage from "Glory, Jest, and Riddle" are, as I have suggested, evidence that "Adde" was material Smith researched during the period of his dissertation, likely intended for his initial dissertation proposal.

a legitimate and valued method—“rehabilitate” it as the editors called it—it remains even now, nearly twenty years later, at the fringes of discourse in the study of religion and, when referred to at all, is most likely presented as a questionable and rather vaguely understood monolithic method, with a dark and perilous history. Smith, to be quite clear, always believed that a proper academic study of religion was impossible without comparison.

It is to joke, riddle, and play that I turn in an attempt to articulate the more profound potential of Smith’s understanding of comparison. It seems ironic that the aspect of Smith’s style that tended toward harsh criticism, his almost impossibly complex and detailed studies of Frazer and Eliade (and there were others), perhaps placed a dark cloud over the whole comparative enterprise, giving it a suspicious reputation or an acceptance as a simple linear process, when he also so often understood comparison in the seemingly playful terms of joke, jest, and riddle and that, among all religion scholars in this new academic era, Smith was singular in his persistent constructive discussions of comparison.

Jokes, Riddles, and the Absurd: The Magic of Comparison as “the Necessary Double-Face”

Memory and Magic

Magic is such a delightful word to me, as are the range of actions and emotions it indicates. The sleight-of-hand tricks or illusions of the stage magician delight because we know them to be magic; it is on the marquee.¹²³ It is the enchantment of the relationship between appearance and reality; we know that what we experience is not what is real. We do not feel duped or disenchanted or fooled, we do not feel we’ve been exposed as naive, because we do not experience a permanent replacement of what we know as the nature of things with something else. Magic doesn’t really work if we don’t have a firm understanding of reality. If we weren’t pretty clear that you can’t rejoin the

¹²³ The Netflix series *Magic for Humans* starring Justin Willman (initiated in 2018) is so fun to watch largely because of the reactions of those who observe the magic. These reactions are wonderful demonstrations of the human capacity and delight in what I call impossible copresents; I think the showing of observer response is an important contribution to this series. These observers hold at once their firm understanding of the world and their observation of the refutation of this understanding. Their responses bear the copresence of belief and disbelief, and it is clear that for most this is a delightful experience.

severed parts of a person cut in half or that rabbits don't live in top hats, we'd not be delighted and amazed by magic illusions. Magic is like mask in this regard. Mask always has that necessary double-face, quite literally; the very experience and concept of mask is a face before a face—mask and masker—one seen, the other hidden but still known. Mask differs importantly from disguise. Disguise attempts to replace one thing with a false second thing, mistaken (or better taken) as real, so totally that an observer sees only the second thing, unaware there is a hidden first thing. Masks often emphasize their “falseness” by their physical rigidity and exaggerated features, often even grotesque, their woodenness, and their ill fit that exposes the masker.

In the context of the creation of sentient beings (or the making of computers with human, or greater, intelligence) I have termed this experience of the double-face, akin to magic, as passing the ultimate Turing test.¹²⁴ This is a test that presents an obviously nonsentient being as a sentient one, yet using methods that constantly remind us that the being is made of plastic and metal. The ultimate Turing test is passed when one, fully aware of the nonsentience of an object, nonetheless experiences it as a sentient being.

When we begin to appreciate the impossible copresence, the necessary double-face, we find it at the core of many things: metaphor (understanding something in terms of something else that we know it is not), art (the artificial presentation of something else that it is not), words (the sounds or graphic symbols that refer to, are the same as, things that they are not), and so on. When I attempt to identify why I've so long been interested in religion, it is because of the seemingly endless examples of these impossible copresents; thus, religion is for me really about what distinguishes us as humans and how elaborate that distinction can be.¹²⁵ I've come to think that a distinctive forte of religion is its endless creative capacity to trade in double-faces; I call it an *aesthetic of impossibles*. Virgin births. Blue gods. Death that is eternal life.

¹²⁴ I develop the notion of the ultimate Turing test in chapter 5, “Ava and the Ultimate Turing Test,” in *Religion and Technology*, 47–58. The Turing test, invented mid-twentieth century by Alan Turing, challenges a human evaluator to determine the identities of two sources of communication—a computer and another human being. Both are physically separate, and the communication is limited to printed communication in language. I developed the notion of the ultimate Turing test on the examples of androids that are clearly known as not truly sentient beings yet are accepted and interacted with as truly sentient beings. The “ultimate” aspect is that we know that our experience is not what our experience is. Magic!

¹²⁵ The proper study of religion to me is focused on this delight in the human capacity akin to the enjoyment of magic. In contrast, a theological or religious intellectual interest in religion is often more akin to the construction of perspectives and explanations (belief systems) that attempt to resolve copresence by shifting away from human capacities, positing beyond-human qualities in constructing the primacy of radical otherness. Smith called this religious strategy *locative*.

God. Heaven. People dying because they break a pole. Whole pantheons of gods. Tree spirits. Myths. Lordy! How can the deadly seriousness with which these impossibles are regularly taken not be deeply interesting?¹²⁶ In an interview, Smith expressed this same attraction I feel, saying, “When I break out laughing while reading a text, that is where I want to focus. Because when something surprises me, it also draws my attention.”¹²⁷ When an interviewer asked him why he got interested in the religions he studies, he responded, “Because they’re funny.”¹²⁸ I’ve always felt it strange that we tend to ignore (a conspiracy of silence?) this “laugh out loud” quality, since it is inseparable from what we most commonly identify as religion.¹²⁹

It is the structurality of the double-face or the impossible copresence that I find to be a core theme to the development of our understanding of the importance and power of comparison. Comparison is magical in a number of senses. It is premised on the placement of two or more items in relationship to others on the basis of a common likeness, yet the only power possible in comparison is in acknowledging and considering the fundamental difference copresent with the sameness. The magic, for me, is that such an impossible copresence fuels transcendence, not some transcending of body and biology, but that magical transcendence that allows us humans to acquire knowledge, to be aware of our sensory perceivings, to have awareness of something beyond our present knowledge and consciousness. This magic, as I delight in it, is among those faculties distinctive to human beings; we are biologically distinctively gifted for magic. A magician might pull a rabbit from a hat, but rabbits don’t pull humans by their ears from anywhere.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Sometimes seriousness is mistakenly expressed as literalness. Certainly, while literal understandings are potential data of our subject and thus to be taken seriously, in light of the discussion of the necessary double-face, literalness correlates with the rejection of the considerable power of the impossible copresence, which I’m attempting to show is fundamental to the distinction of being human.

¹²⁷ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 49–50.

¹²⁸ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 4.

¹²⁹ The proclaiming of what is obviously laughable and unbelievable as serious and believed is something I think should be taken quite seriously by an academic study of religion; it is a potential marker of religion. In a world of reason and common sense, those things we so often separate out as being religious are so ludicrous, so unbelievable. Given this observation, the seemingly endless arguments for the reality of God, the many contentious meetings of atheists and believers, the endless flow of theology, these all seem, to me anyway, to need framing in the context of riddle and joke and jest. My intent is not to denigrate any of these things. Quite the opposite. It is to treasure them, in the terms not so different from our treasuring of magic and masks, for their illustration of the remarkable human capacity for the impossible copresence of the serious and literal with the totally unreasonable and fantastical. For me, a proper academic study of religion can scarcely exist apart from any other perspective.

¹³⁰ The continuity yet distinctiveness of humans among their animate kin is fascinating to me. I’m always intrigued, if also often a bit irritated, by those who argue (and offer what always seem to

It is perhaps not so surprising that Smith introduced his consideration of comparison in his essay titled “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” (1982) with a discussion of the long history of theories of memory as it eventually provided the background for theories of magic. Smith identifies Aristotle’s *De memoria et reminiscencia* 451b as the earliest coherent theory of memory, memory as an experience of “something either similar or contrary to what we seek or else from that which is contiguous to it.”¹³¹ Smith then traces this theory of memory across history to the development of the notion of the laws of association to observe that these laws played an important role in the early development of theories of religion. Notably, in 1886, they shaped Edward B. Tylor’s discussion of “the logic of magical praxis.” In his *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, Tylor described magic as “any association of ideas in a man’s mind, the vaguest similarity of form or position, even a mere coincidence in time, is sufficient to enable the magician to work from associations in his own mind, to associations in the material world.”¹³² Magic: from association in mind to causation in materiality. How is this different from hypothetic inference?

Memory might seem an odd heritage to theories of magic, yet why not? In my own reflections on time, especially the experience of time I sometimes refer to as the “fat present,”¹³³ I suggest that memory is the present experience of what is marked as no longer present. To be memory it must be present, yet its presence is identified as the “not now” or the “no longer.” An impossible copresence; a magical illusion that is not illusion.

me rather lame evidence) that animals are religious or that animals dance. What I find powerfully positive about favoring biology is that we might locate human beings among an enormous family of animate organisms, yet, at the same time, I don’t think it is at all difficult or even controversial to endlessly identify factors that distinguish humans among the other animate organisms. I have sometimes developed funny lists to try to capture these distinctions: penguins don’t pen poetry, amoebas don’t do art, deer don’t dialogue about death. They might make a fun little collection of poems or essays should I have the creativity. And I think the same sort of issue is raised by the advancements of AI and robots. Doubtless AIs can write music. They do so by crunching the big data of renowned classical music (as identified by humans, of course) to determine statistical probabilities of features that can be “composed” into a piece of music. It might be possible for AI joined with synthesizers to play the music as well. Yet AIs don’t hear music, they are not moved by music, they don’t break out into song when they are working together, they do not come to compose music as a stage in the long process of learning to play, and do not appreciate music beginning with squeaking sounds from a clarinet or the ear-splitting thrashings of a garage band.

¹³¹ Smith, “In Comparison,” 25.

¹³² Quoted in Smith, “In Comparison,” 25.

¹³³ See my *Religion and Technology*, chapter 21, “It Is Bigger on the Inside! TARDIS and Wormholes.”

In the third edition of *The Golden Bough*, Frazer expanded on Tylor to form the classic anthropological typology of magic.

If my analysis of the magician's logic is correct, its two great principles turn out to be merely two different misapplications of the association of ideas. Homeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by similarity; contagious magic is founded on the association of ideas by contiguity.¹³⁴

Smith's critique of magic shows how the logic of magic, being based on principles of association, informs comparison. His concern is that it bequeaths to scholarship a heritage in which "*comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity. The chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity. . . . The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.*"¹³⁵ Thus comparison resembles the magic of contiguity and bears the commonly understood negative implications of magic as "misapplications of the association of ideas." To associate comparison with the magic in anthropological theory is to damn it as primitive naivete with the associated loss of its potential delight and, of course, its remarkable power.

Smith offers a range of critiques based on his sense of what was academic practice of comparison contemporary to his writing.¹³⁶ He concludes "In Comparison a Magic Dwells"—let us keep his provocative title in mind—with a bleak assessment of comparison as it has existed across history.

We must conclude this exercise in our own academic history in a most unsatisfactory manner. . . . we have gained little over our predecessors in either the method for making comparison or the reasons for its practice. . . . So we are left with the question [quoting Wittgenstein], "How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of the two things?" The possibility of the study of religion depends on its answer.¹³⁷

What did Smith mean by including "magic" in his title? It seems he was referring to the failed and illegitimate focus on the accidental and surprising awareness of sameness that then required some explanation after the fact, a

¹³⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed, 1:53 and 1:221–22 as quoted in Smith, "In Comparison," 25. It is fascinating that C. S. Peirce's theory of signs has similarities. Iconic signs are based on the principle of the relationship of similarity; indexical signs are signs based on the relationship of contiguity.

¹³⁵ Smith, "In Comparison," 25–26.

¹³⁶ See Smith, "In Comparison," 26.

¹³⁷ Smith, "In Comparison," 41.

primitive misconception of causation and connection identified by Frazer as magic. To say that magic dwells in comparison would seem to be calling our attention to the continuing failure of comparison in our academic efforts. His description of the failed uses of comparison across history, yet to be corrected or surpassed in the contemporary period, seem unquestioningly damning.

Yet, should we have learned anything of the deeper wisdom nearly constantly expressed in Smith's choices of titles, his interest in difference, his delight in joke and jest, his frequent references to play, his finding Frazer of interest precisely because he failed and did so deliberately, we might not want to confine our understanding of his reference to "magic in comparison" as necessarily damning. Indeed, I suggest that the term "magic" might also refer to the qualities of the necessary double-face, the impossible copresence, that are engaged in comparison seemingly at every moment, including its serendipitous identification of sameness as with the *déjà vu* quality of memory. How does this unexpected abduction by a sense of familiarity, a sense of remembering, differ from what is operating in those aspects of Smith's technical description referred to by the phrases "held to be significant" and "of interest to us"?

Smith's final sentence—"the possibility of the study of religion depends on its answer"—inspires us to embrace these impossibly copresent implications of magic as insight into the technique of comparison. We must take to heart Smith's belief that the very "possibility for a study of religion" is entirely dependent on answering Wittgenstein's question, that is, on constructing an adequate theory of comparison. Can we not see the correlations between magic and comparison as inspiring a fuller development of comparison as an academic method? Smith led the way to engaging this question by indicating that "comparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological) and a methodical manipulation of difference, a playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end."¹³⁸ The magic is, then, as I want to state it, that comparison must comprise the "necessary double-face," that is, the impossible copresence of sameness (even identity) and difference. When the difference is irreconcilable, that is, truly impossible, the comparison is magical in the sense of transcending the reduction to scientific explanation, yet demanding attention by the very copresence of impossibles. Being abducted by this comparative process engages a heuristic oscillatory process that may inspire hypotheses. Sometimes hypotheses

¹³⁸ Smith "In Comparison," 40.

produce, through induction and deduction, satisfying conclusions, halting the generative processes of comparison. Yet the most classic of comparisons, the foundational impossible copresents, seem, generation after generation, to fuel history and creativity. This persistence born of the irreconcilable is the true magic of the necessary double-face; comparison, in this sense, is based in the capacities gained by human biological beings through their evolution.¹³⁹

It is my sense that the articulation of the potential of comparative categories is an essential work of the proper academic study of religion. I have devoted decades to the development of dancing as a comparative category with high potential. Given the Protestant Christian legacy to which the academic study of religion owes its foundation, it is shocking that dancing is even recognized as relevant to a study of religion, save perhaps the rejection of dancing in religious contexts. Yet in my dancing experience in a number of cultures around the world and certainly in the literature of religions the world over, dancing and religion are constant companions. There are endless examples of religious dance dramas. It is so common for dancing to be associated with religion that in many communities the two approach synonymy. Thus, I have found much potential in asking about the dynamics of the connection of religion and dancing, how dancing forges and expresses human identity, how dancing is recognized among so many religious communities as particularly valued, and certainly how dancing reveals something quite fundamental and distinctive to being human. I have attempted to show that dancing is a category that at once allows the student of religion to compare (I have the urge here to include “and contrast,” yet I’d prefer that by now difference in comparison is understood as essential) an enormous range of exempla among religious communities across the globe. And copresent to the consideration of this complex diversity is an inquiry into how dancing and religion, dancing and being human, are strongly connected.¹⁴⁰ Certainly, establishing a range of comparative categories is primary work for the proper study of religion.

¹³⁹ Smith regularly proclaimed that he found questions more interesting than answers. Raising questions was common to his pedagogy. See Christopher I. Lehrich (ed.), *On Teaching Religion: Essays by Jonathan Z. Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). To emphasize what I’m referring to here as the classic comparisons further shows the thinness of the four-stage linear understanding of the “comparative enterprise” that is commonly foregrounded as Smith’s method of comparison.

¹⁴⁰ See my *Dancing Culture Religion*.

Metaphor, Joke, Riddle, Play

Begin with the Wittgenstein statement that Smith quoted, “How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of the two things?” Add to it what seems implied but not stated, that these two things are declared to be the same, equal, maybe even identical, yet that we clearly know that they are quite distinct, markedly and unquestionably different, perhaps even in opposition. Now let us posit that this very identity of things that is clearly not identical is held to be fundamental to understanding and impacting reality. Were we to put this set of propositions to Tylor and Frazer, we would likely expect them to declare this set of relationships to be the workings of a primitive mind, one that does not comprehend actual causation or the rational laws of association. One who says that something is what we (modern scientific folks) know it is not and cannot be is surely a primitive being, and the only way to appreciate these false connections would be to posit a theory or logic of magic.¹⁴¹ Yet, of course, the described condition that what “*is* is what we know it *is not*” is to state the underlying structurality of metaphor: understanding one thing in terms of another that we full well know it is not. The convention used among students of metaphor is to present the two terms (often in caps) joined by the verb indicating identity, IS or ARE, as in LOVE IS JOURNEY or ARGUMENT IS WAR. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson showed long ago,¹⁴² we can scarcely exclude the presence of metaphor from any utterance. The business of metaphor is not limited to poetic nuance and expression; it is at the center of expanding knowledge and understanding. Metaphor is the workhorse of the transcendence required to move us beyond what we know to what we do not know; and isn’t this remarkable? It is not a linear method that leads from naught to something (a single intentional use); it is a mostly transparent or nonconscious oscillatory process that is continually refined and developed through frequent use. Metaphor becomes tacitly embedded in language functioning to gesturally naturalize as just-so the impossible on which metaphor is based. My preference is to embrace the impossible copresence of metaphor as magical rather than to abandon its association with magic; the power of metaphor is like pulling a rabbit from a top hat.

¹⁴¹ Isn’t it also rather ironic that this phrase, “logic of magic,” is so often used?

¹⁴² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Beginning with his study of Frazer, Smith gave frequent mention to jest and riddle as also to play. Many of his essay titles are in the form of jest or riddle. Knowing Smith for half a century, I think it is consistent with his character to leave riddles and jokes for us to enjoy and explore, if and when we discover them.¹⁴³ Jest and riddle are closely related to the terms “difference” and “map” and “gap” that were of constant interest to Smith. Although not so prominent, regular and important references to play also recur. Part I of his dissertation was titled “*Homo Ludens*: Frazer as Play.”¹⁴⁴ This array of related terms is relevant to his regular consideration of comparison.

Jest or joke and riddle are both forms that juxtapose unusual or even impossible items with the intention of, not the resolution, but rather the appreciation of the effects and energetics created by such juxtapositions. We smile or laugh at a joke; attempts at explaining jokes are inappropriate or in bad taste or simply ruin the joke. Riddle varies from puzzle or problem in that the solution of the riddle does not release us from the riddle; rather it gives us pause to appreciate the double sense of the thing. Often, through misdirection, a riddle conjoins what is with what cannot be, and “getting it” allows us to marvel at its cleverness as well as perhaps our own remarkable ability to appreciate and engage such cleverness.¹⁴⁵

A proper academic study of religion is a play between *our* invention of religion (singular) and *our* designation of relevant data (religious) among the independent realities that *we* identify as religions (plural). As Smith repeatedly

¹⁴³ I recall a meeting at an O’Hare airport hotel in Chicago of the various area editors for Smith’s *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995). As general editor, he held forth with a description of why he believed such reference works were important and his vision for the project. I recall his musing about strings of references and notes, some of which might simply lead in circles or blind ends. He delighted in the idea of these existing without anyone ever finding them. Few are aware of Smith’s contributions to this work. He wrote hundreds of the entries, and I know that he rewrote a great many credited to other scholars, including me. Smith loved to find hidden and even unintended clues to riddles and jokes only he perceived. Many were the occasions on meeting Smith at a conference when he’d pull me aside to report on the connections and jokes he had found in the sequences of entries in the local yellow pages; cosmic jokes offered unintentional juxtapositions created by the alphabetization of local business listings.

¹⁴⁴ Two decades ago, I made the effort—an early exploring attempt—at comprehending this aspect of Smith’s work in terms of play. See my “No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*,” reprinted as chapter 2 in this book. Perhaps because of the common dismissal of play as light and not serious, this effort had, to my awareness, little impact on how Smith has been read. Perhaps in the meantime my insights have matured, and with the shift of terms, I might more effectively present what I believe is a fundamental component to the future development of the secular academic study of religion.

¹⁴⁵ Much of my own academic work over the last several decades has focused on foregrounding this distinctive human faculty identified by terms such as “play,” “aesthetic of impossibles,” “copresence,” “chiasm,” and so on. My interest derives largely from my experience of human self-movement and dancing, yet its relevance to the academy and the study of religion owes much to my half century of reading and reflecting on Smith and his work.

reminded us, there are no ontologically distinctive data of religion (nor, of course, the invented category); indeed, any damned thing or action might be somehow so designated at one time and place or another.¹⁴⁶ The term “religion” (singular) designates something posited that applies to being human, yet the term is a modern invention (again, as Smith so often reminded us) that serves the needs felt by its inventors, be they academics or folk, with a modern sense of common global categories. To be properly academic in these terms, the category labeled “religion” must embrace data across history inclusive of all cultures.¹⁴⁷ It must be based on the comparative analysis of all these data that it might arrive at tentative distinctive traits. The comparisons made in the distinction of the genus at the core of the field must not privilege any set of data, especially on the grounds of religious beliefs (the foundational perspectives of one particular cultural and historical tradition).¹⁴⁸

A proper academic study of religion cannot avoid comparison. Classification, definition, typology, terminology, data identification, discourse, perception, and advancements to knowledge are shot through with applications of comparison, if often implicit. While comparison, as it operates in metaphor and art, for example, will always operate mostly tacitly, there must be a fuller understanding of the technical requirements for comparison when used as an academic method. What I hope this study of comparison, based on Smith’s many writings on it, shows is that it is not a simple linear method that leads from one point to another, from knowing nothing to knowing something. Nor is comparison a fundamentally rational objective method that ensures academic clarity and purity. Nor is comparison an imperialist failed method of asserting superiority. Nor does the evidence of the failure in the practice of comparison in its various modes and classes give reason to abandon it as essential to a proper academic study. Comparison is something we might consciously construct and use as academic method; thus, we might formulate and practice it in ways that succeed or fail, yet we cannot simply avoid comparison. Comparison is the milieu in which we

¹⁴⁶ The appreciation of the possible range of what we often consider to be strange, weird, and horrible as religious, somewhere sometime, sheds light on the overly limiting view so common among scholars as well as folk that “religion is good” and all the synonymous associations. Such a view clearly has specific religious, cultural, and historical precessions.

¹⁴⁷ This global field does not technically require that something religious be found among them all; but it does mean that a culture in which something religious does not appear to exist is in itself of interest.

¹⁴⁸ I’ve been fascinated by Milan Kundera’s observation that religions do not do jokes.

function; it is shaped by and shapes the ongoing creative encounters we have with our subjects.

Smith gave full expression to his sense of the importance of comparison to a proper academic study of religion in the closing paragraphs of his chapter “On Comparison” in *Drudgery Divine*.

Comparison, as seen from such a view, is an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstitution which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary. The comparative enterprise provides a set of perspectives which “serve different analytic purposes by emphasizing varied aspects” of the object of study.¹⁴⁹

It is the scholar’s intellectual purpose—whether explanatory or interpretative, whether generic or specific—which highlights that principled postulation of similarity which is the ground of the methodical comparison of difference being interesting. Lacking a clear articulation of purpose, one may derive arresting anecdotal juxtapositions or self-serving differentiations, but the disciplined constructive work of the academy will not have been advanced, nor will the study of religion have come of age.¹⁵⁰

Comparison has the necessary double-face of being powered by the distinctly human capacity to say that one thing is another, yet what is important is that the one thing isn’t the other and we know it all along. Such a structurality—one of play and joke and riddle—applies remarkably not only to comparison, but, writ large, to religion as we make the effort to distinguish it and religions as we endeavor to observe or be abducted by them. Comparison, like religion, has an abductive quality. Abduction, as Charles Sanders Peirce spent a lifetime considering, is that feeling kind of knowing, often described as surprise, that gives rise to hypotheses.¹⁵¹ He held that the methods of argumentation we refer to as induction and deduction add little if anything to our knowledge; both tend to rearrange what is already known.

¹⁴⁹ His quotation in this paragraph is from F. J. P. Poole, “Metaphors and Maps: Toward Comparison in the Anthropology of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986): 432.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 53.

¹⁵¹ See Sam Gill, “Religion by Abduction,” in *Native American Religious Action: A Performance Approach to Religion* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 3–16 and my chapter 14, “To Risk Meaning Nothing: Charles Sanders Peirce and the Logic of Discovery,” in *Creative Encounters*.

Yet abduction, the experience of incongruity, gives rise to new hypotheses. Hypothesis, best guess, once formulated, takes us back to induction and deduction, and the application of these methods eventually takes us back to abduction. Back and forth. It is the structurality of fascination and obsession. It is the structurality of vitality itself, an exercise of life that fueled Frazer to spend over twenty-five years copying and arranging ethnographic data from five thousand sources into ever-evolving patterns that tend, over time, to be a repetitive gestural practice, each iteration a contribution to a life practice. It is the structurality that drove Smith to spend six years checking thousands of exempla presented by Frazer, knowing all along that Frazer had deliberately failed, with each iteration of comparison an enrichment of the joke. It is the structurality that inspired me to go to Australia to track the documents source upon source in search of an actual person, place, and time that formed the basis for the defining discussions of religion presented by my two teachers, Eliade and Smith, only to find what I knew all along, that both had concocted evidence in one fashion or another. Comparison, as understood by Jonathan Smith, is the magic of the necessary double-face, the impossible copresence that fuels the kind of passion that energizes an entire field of study, a study that offers insights and values broadly to human cultures.

2

No Place to Stand

Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*

Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world.

Archimedes¹

Raising questions, demolishing unquestioned categories and patterns, insisting that discerning difference is fundamental to comparison—these are the trademarks of Jonathan Z. Smith’s scholarship. His perspective and the accompanying academic operations foster studies that produce theory in religion, theory that I will argue might well be understood in terms of play.²

Juxtaposition is Smith’s initiating operation. He sets two or more “things” side by side—texts, interpretations, quotations and their sources, ideas, and approaches. Juxtaposition is more than placing two things in adjacent spaces.

¹ Archimedes, as quoted by Pappus of Alexandria, *Synagoge*, Book VIII, c. A.D. 340; also found in *Chiliades* (twelfth century) by John Tzetzes, II.130.

² Quite obviously from the title, my concern is with play and how it characterizes not only Smith’s work but also with how the academic study of religion would benefit significantly by adopting a play theory of religion. This focus immediately raises the difficult question of what I understand as play. I am convinced that our attempts to define such words as “religion” and “play” have gone sour because we have approached them from the assumptions of classical category theory. George Lakoff discusses the limitations of the classical theory and offers a prototype theory as a more useful alternative. Though it would take much more space than a note or even an article to deal with a definition of play, I must here say at least that for historical and cultural reasons we tend to see what we understand as the distinctive actions of children as one of our principal prototypes for play. Thus, the playground and children running seemingly randomly about the space provide one prototype from which we develop the idea that play is like a back-and-forth movement without apparent intent or final goal. Games provide another prototype. The play of a game is that action and interaction which results from holding together two opposing forces. When one conquers or dominates in a way the other cannot possibly overcome, there is no longer play. From this prototype we associate play with all sorts of dialogical structures, offering, for example, an alternative to hierarchical dualities such as right and wrong and good and evil. For a discussion across a long history of writings on play and how play offers insights to the development of a proper academic study of religion see Sam Gill, “Play,” in Russell T. McCutcheon and Willi Braun (eds.), *Critical Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2000), 451–62.

Juxtaposition is a placement that implies relationship. Juxtaposition is the necessary precondition to comparison. It demands comparison. An effective juxtaposition engages a tension among the items juxtaposed, a tension that raises questions not easily answered. In an engaging juxtaposition there is movement back and forth among the elements. An interplay.

In comparison the acceptance of difference is the grounds of its being interesting, creative, and important. Difference drives the interplay. Smith conceives this difference most commonly in such terms as incongruity, lack of fit, and incredulity. He frequently invokes Paul Ricoeur's axiom "Incongruity gives rise to thought," or as he has stated more formally: there is through comparison "a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end."³

Juxtaposition frames the comparative enterprise. Difference fuels comparison. To initiate and maintain the playful process is as important as forcing it to precipitate some unwarranted conclusion. The thoughtful process generates theory and insight.

Smith does not limit this dynamic process to the technical academic methods of a student of religion and culture. He recognizes that they are present as well in the structures of religious experience. His analyses tend to move easily between the study of some aspect of a specific religious tradition and the study of religion itself and, even more broadly, the whole educational process.

Smith also shifts back and forth between the study of religion and academic self-criticism. But the method is constant: juxtaposition (comparison), difference (incongruity or incredulity), thought (reflection).⁴ Numerous pairs are played against each other: (1) the entities juxtaposed for comparison, (2) the deconstructive and reconstructive phases (that is, difference and thought or incongruity and reflection), (3) the study of religious phenomena and the self-conscious analysis of academic method, and

³ Smith, *To Take Place*, 14. Another statement on difference is, "It is difference that generates thought, whether at the level of data or of theory. Thus, a model gains its cognitive power by not according in all respects to that which it models. 'Map is not territory' and is, therefore, of intellectual value." Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion Up and Down, Out and In: The Relationship of Text to Artifact," in B. M. Gitlin (ed.), *Sacred Time, Sacred Space: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Winona Lake, WI: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 4.

⁴ I always have the desire to add to Smith's focus on thought by including action. Action, doing something external, would include writing and discourse in the field of scholarship and a whole range of human action in the religious field. I will note later, however, that Smith's work is self-consciously focused upon text and scholarship, where, likely, it has seemed to him thought is an adequate descriptor.

(4) the subject and the object of the enterprise. Smith's approach depends in the most basic way upon juxtaposition, upon the holding together of two things that cannot easily subsume one another. He does not seek some final resolution but rather an occasional clarification, even the revelation of more interesting juxtapositions.⁵

Religion and the Study of Religion

Smith's approach to religion can be considered *sub specie ludi*. Play is an important element running through Jonathan Smith's study of religion, key both to appreciating and to critically evaluating his work. Furthermore, understanding Smith's notion of play has implications for other recitings of religion, notably Milan Kundera's, as I will show.

Religion, as Smith understands it, is a mode of human creativity.

What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. What we study is the passion and drama of man discovering the truth of what it is to be human. History is the framework within whose perimeter those human expressions, activities and intentionalities that we call "religious" occur. Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's "situation" so as to have "space" in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate one's domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one's existence "matters." Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct, and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation.⁶

⁵ The prototype of play most operative here is play as game. Similar views of play date as early as Friedrich Schiller in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), in which he posited a series of paired drives—such as the formal and sensuous drives—which, when engaged with one another, gave rise to a third drive, the *Speiltrieb*. For Charles Sanders Peirce, who attributes his understanding of play to Schiller's influence, see Charles S. Hardwick (ed.), *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles Sanders Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 64.

⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," in *Map Is Not Territory*, 290–91. The paper was delivered as a lecture in May 1974.

And, according to Smith,

Man . . . has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.

For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as *exempli gratia* of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion.⁷

With respect to religion Smith shows us that the playful character of being human is exemplified as an oscillation⁸ among an array of active and passive, willful and receptive attributes: activities and intentionalities, invention and participation, creation and discovery, quest and location, manipulation and negotiation, construct and map, analysis and reflective imagination. The activities, expressions, and intentionalities that are considered to be religious take such forms as myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation. These actions are not distinguished by any unique religiousness; they are open to analysis as religious in terms of their characterization of worlds, situations, spaces, domains, spheres, powers, and positions. The study of religion parallels its practice and experience. As religion is an “attempt to map, construct and inhabit . . . positions of power,” the study of religion is an attempt to map those data that are chosen to exemplify religion. Whereas religion maps, constructs, and inhabits “through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation,” the study of religion maps through the “imaginative acts of comparison and generalization.” Myths, rituals, and experiences of

⁷ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

⁸ Oscillation is common to the view of play that develops on the prototype of the actions distinctive of children. This view of play is used by Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 91–119, in his consideration of the ontology of art.

transformation are structurally parallel to academic theories and methods. It is not the religiousness of the data that directs the study of religion, it is the imaginative and self-conscious selection of theory.⁹

Throughout his work, Smith's concern, given his view of religion, is where the academic stands in her or his endeavor. Hence, it is no surprise that the issue of "place" is a persistent topic.

Place

Smith's critical examination of Mircea Eliade's most basic and universal pattern and symbolism—the "center"—began as early as 1971 in a lecture entitled "The Wobbling Pivot" in which he suggested that Eliade overemphasized the center to the exclusion of other place categories.¹⁰ He presented a series of queries and applications intended to complement and extend Eliade's conception. Smith attributes to Eliade a generative theory of religion: "The question of the character of the place on which one stands is the fundamental question as Eliade has taught us."¹¹ Perhaps Smith learned this from Eliade, but his various analyses of Eliade's studies of religion show that, for Eliade, it was a question not so much posed as answered, in a fashion he and many others have considered definitive.¹²

A statement made by Claude Lévi-Strauss is likely the more important and persistent inspiration for the formation and development of Smith's concerns with the interconnection of "place" and the analysis of religious experience.¹³ As early as 1968 in a lecture entitled "Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?," in the preface to *To Take Place*, and several other times, Smith quoted the following passage from Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*:

⁹ Taking Smith's priorities seriously means that these parallels between religion and the study of religion are also the product of a self-conscious selection of theory. It is not that religion has some inherent nature or essence, it is that religion takes on this profile according to the way Smith chooses to construct the data he considers relevant to his theory of religion.

¹⁰ Smith regularly uses Eliade as the foil against which to articulate his understanding of religion and the academic study of religion. I have compared their views of place in Sam Gill, "Territory," in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 298–313; and Gill, *Storytracking*, chapter 7.

¹¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," in *Map Is Not Territory*, 103.

¹² The essentialist aspect of Eliade's work greatly limits his playfulness.

¹³ Smith frequently cites the statement attributed to Archimedes that serves as epigraph for this chapter, and occasionally a statement by Mary Douglas, "Holiness is exemplified by correctness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused." Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Methuen, 1966), 53.

A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that “All sacred things must have their place.” It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them. Examined superficially and from the outside, the refinements of ritual can appear pointless. They are explicable by a concern for what one might call “micro adjustment”—the concern to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class.¹⁴

There is for Smith a high potential for insight when students of religion attend to categories of place. The designation of meaning, sometimes referred to as “sacrality,” is related to place. The language of symbol and social structure expresses an individual’s or a culture’s vision of its place. Place is articulated in the act of creating and discovering worlds of meaning.¹⁵ Whereas Mircea Eliade equates the “sacred” with the place category of the center, Smith enriches and even confounds this simple identity. Whereas Lévi-Strauss equates the “sacred” with “being in place,” this is but the beginning for Smith.

Smith articulates a notion of place in the terms of two categories he labels “locative” and “utopian.” A locative vision of the world emphasizes place.¹⁶ A utopian vision of the world emphasizes the value of being in no place.¹⁷

Those myths and rituals which belong to a locative map of the cosmos labor to overcome all incongruity by assuming the interconnectedness of all things, the adequacy of symbolization . . . and the power and possibility of repetition. They allow for moments of ritualized disjunction, but these are part of a highly structured scenario (initiation, New Year) in which the disjunctive (identified with the liminal or chaotic) will be overcome through recreation.¹⁸

¹⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 10. Smith usually accompanied this passage with a footnote in which he juxtaposed to Lévi-Strauss’s statement the text from the Pawnee Hako as recorded by Alice Fletcher on which Lévi-Strauss based his statement. Juxtaposition, comparison, difference, and thought lead Smith to conclude that “it is not, in this account, being-in-their-place which confers sacrality as Lévi-Strauss suggests” (Jonathan Z. Smith, “Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?,” in *Map Is Not Territory*, 148 n. 5).

¹⁵ See Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Influence of Symbols on Social Change,” in *Map Is Not Territory*, 141, 145.

¹⁶ Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” 101.

¹⁷ Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” 101.

¹⁸ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 308–9.

A utopian map of the cosmos is developed which perceives terror and confinement in interconnection, correspondence and repetition. The moments of disjunction become coextensive with finite existence and the world is perceived to be chaotic, reversed, liminal. Rather than celebration, affirmation and repetition, man turns in rebellion and flight to a new world and a new mode of creation.¹⁹

Although Smith emphasizes that taken together these maps present the basic dichotomy among religions (and he exemplifies them with specific religious traditions), one cannot simply classify religions in terms of these maps. The locative map has been by far the more familiar. But, as Smith notes, this reflects the way in which the study of religion has been approached.²⁰

The locative map is necessarily a centered map. It depends on some order or set of organizing principles, that is, some center, whether or not it is spatially marked. Eliade proclaimed an identity between the “sacred” and this locative, centered, map of the world. He contrasted all other maps as “profane” or nonreligious. In “The Wobbling Pivot” Smith suggests that the elements of chaos, which Eliade identified as profane, can be more effectively comprehended in the context of a religious worldview. Chaos, Smith says, “is a sacred power; but it is frequently perceived as being sacred ‘in the wrong way.’”²¹ He cites the myth of the charioteer in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (253–254) to illustrate his argument: “If one had only the white horse of decorum, temperance, and restraint, he would never reach heaven and the gods. If one had only the lawless black horse, he would rape the gods when he appeared before them. Without the black horse there would be neither motion nor life; without the white horse there would be no limits.”²²

¹⁹ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

²⁰ “Students of religion have been most successful in describing and interpreting this locative, imperial map of the world—especially within archaic, urban cultures. . . . Yet, the very success of these topographies should be a signal for caution. For they are largely based on documents from urban, agricultural, hierarchical cultures. The most persuasive witnesses to a locative, imperial worldview are the production of well-organized, self-conscious scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place. The texts are, by and large, the production of temples and royal courts and provide their *raison d’être*—the temple, upon which the priest’s and scribe’s income rested, as ‘Center’ and microcosm; the requirements of exact repetition in ritual and the concomitant notion of ritual as a reenactment of divine activities, both of which are dependent upon written texts which only the elite could read; and propaganda for their chief patron, the king, as guardian of cosmic and social order. In most cases one cannot escape the suspicion that, in the locative map of the world, we are encountering a self-serving ideology which ought not to be generalized into the universal pattern of religions experience and expression.” Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 293.

²¹ Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” 97.

²² Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” 97.

Smith holds that there is an interdependence between the locative center-oriented map and the utopian chaos-generating map. He links the sacred and the chaotic (rather than the profane) and thus shows that there is a religiousness to being out of place as well as to being in place. Still, partly because the locative map has been so successfully and extensively documented by students of religion, but also because of the nature of maps, the utopian map tends to be seen as at most a subtle development upon, enrichment of, the old model, that is, a momentary phase in the reformulation of new locative orders. In “The Influence of Symbols on Social Change” Smith shows that social change is often motivated when a culture experiences chaos. He follows Suzanne Langer’s view that man “can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos.”²³ And this seems especially true for students of religion.

The utopian map cannot stand as a structural equivalent and parallel to the locative map; it can scarcely be conceived at all except in terms of the rejection of or rebellion against a locative map. Although Smith cites examples of the utopian map, it does not seem that he is actually interested in establishing it as a separate map. Rather, it seems he wants to show how these two maps are interdependent, how they stand together in complex relationships that are fundamental to religion.

Incongruity, issues of fit, constitute another relational factor that Smith develops. In his “Map Is Not Territory” incongruity is focal. In the penultimate paragraph of this essay Smith summarizes his concern with incongruity in what he describes as a third map of the world. “The dimension of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appears to belong to yet another map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, truth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.”²⁴ According to Smith none of the three maps can “be identified with any particular cultures at any particular time. They remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man’s experience of the world.”²⁵ This view follows on Smith’s earlier observation in

²³ Smith, “Influence of Symbols,” referencing Suzanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 4th ed., 1960).

²⁴ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

²⁵ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

“The Influence of Symbols on Social Change”: “Each society has moments of ritualized disjunction, moments of ‘descent into chaos’ of ritual reversal, of liminality, of collective anomie. But these are part of a highly structured scenario in which these moments will be overcome through the creation of a new world, the raising of an individual to a new status, or the strengthening of community.”²⁶

Smith’s concern is more with fit than with pattern, and this constitutes his more fundamental revision. Smith views humans as both creators and discoverers of their place in the world (with the corresponding notion that their view of their world can be articulated in terms of place). This means that human religious and social actions are generated by and given meaning in the terms of fit, the relationship between map and territory.

Smith’s discussion, developed in the terms of three maps, would be clearer (at least to me) if understood as attitudes toward maps or mapping strategies. Religions take shape in the process of juxtaposing experience with structuring maps. What Smith describes as a locative map is an attitude that seeks congruence of map (worldview) and territory (experience). It stretches the map to encompass all aspects of the territory, even apparent disjunctions like initiation and the New Year. The locative attitude would seek an expansion of the map to approach the scale of one to one. The motivation is to find the meaning of experience in the corresponding perfect and complete fit of the map. In contrast, what Smith describes as a utopian map is an antimap attitude. The utopian attitude finds maps artificial, constraining, threatening. The utopian motivation is to shrink the scale and inclusiveness of maps, to diminish their influence, to find meaning in experience itself rather than any map correspondences.

These two attitudes toward maps are mirror images. Neither is achievable in its pure form except in the most special and momentary of circumstances. When a map achieves full scale, it is experienced either as suffocating or as indistinguishable from the territory it charts. When all designations and categorizations of place are eliminated in the utopian moment of “being in no place,” there can be no vision of the world at all. The utopian, like the locative, attitude is a process forever seeking fulfillment and a process always defined in terms of a rejected map (Smith uses the terms “rebellion” and “flight” and the examples “gnostic revaluation” and “yogic reversal”).

²⁶ Smith, “Influence of Symbols,” 145.

In this place-founded imagination of religion, map, whatever its kind, is indispensable. What Smith shows is that there is a range of attitudes about the relationship between map and territory spanning a domain defined by ideals at the opposing extremes that he terms “locative” and “utopian.” Smith’s insight has been to shift the study of religion from a classification of map types, of the identification of religion with one map coordinate, to an examination of the dynamics of the relationships between maps (worldviews) and territories (human experiences). It is to see that religiousness occurs in the play between map and territory, worldview and experience. Juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought.

The third, yet unnamed, map that Smith describes is not so much a third ideal, though technically Smith presents it as such, as it is a necessary product of Smith’s analytical scheme. This position, as Smith envisions this religious map, allows “that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction.” However, following my argument, in the face of the impossible (or at best rare and momentary) achievement of either the locative or utopian ideals, the only positive alternative is to “allow the incongruous elements to stand.” Here the incongruity is not only that between map and territory but between either ideal goal and its respective accomplishment.

One may choose to limit religion to those rare moments of achieving the locative or utopian goals (as in happily accepted complete dogmatism or rarefied mystical moments) and to the more or less tragic strivings toward these ideals. This has been a common choice of students of religion, and it remains a popular notion. Smith shows students of religion the double-face, the holding together of tragedy and comedy. Without rejecting a basically tragic view, one may complement it with a comic and playful view, allowing religion the mode of experience “to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.” Rather than some third unnamed, seemingly exceptional, subdivision, all religion occurs as the inevitable play between map and territory. It is the play of fit. To return to Smith’s analogy of the charioteer, all cultures must drive chariots, reining them at once toward the desire to have a place for everything with everything in its place and the desire to be free of all constraints, or, put negatively, toward the boredom with and oppression of a static and dogmatic order and toward the terror and anxiety of chaos.

Smith’s accomplishment here may be described as enriching the categories and characterizations of place that distinguish religion. Because he presents

his discussion of place in terms of different kinds of maps, I fear many may limit his accomplishment to this static notion. His more important accomplishment is in giving the play to place,²⁷ that is, in showing us that religions may be engagingly understood by considering the ways they think about and act toward the relationship between maps (worldviews) and territories (experience). And extending that, Smith shows us that religion arises in and exists because of the play of difference.

As with religions, so with the study of religion.²⁸ As religions create and discover meaning in the struggle of juxtaposing given categories with experience, so also do students of religion, but the latter are largely engaged in mapping territories comprised of religious mappings. This helps us begin to comprehend—I'll return to it later—the provocative title and conclusion to Smith's "Map Is Not Territory." "We [academics] need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: 'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess."²⁹ Smith illuminates the correlation—a locative style correlation—between academic method and the resulting understanding of religion. In his shift from a method of correlating academic maps to religious territories to include religious strategies and attitudes toward mapping, he demands a major reconsideration of such basic religious forms as myth and ritual.

Myth

As a category, myth has confused and often confounded the study of religion in that it has been used to denigrate as well as elevate. It refers variously, even

²⁷ While I argue that Smith presents a play approach to religion, and his language often suggests he is doing so self-consciously, the play elements might have been richer and clearer had the level of self-consciousness been higher. For example, by shifting Smith's presentation made in the nominal terms of maps to the verbal terms of mapping strategies, the dynamic relationship between opposing drives as described by Friedrich Schiller might illuminate the dynamics of the relationship. Schiller argued that play arises in "a reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the activity of the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active" (Schiller, *On the Aesthetics of Man*, XIV.1).

²⁸ It is the other way around actually, since religion is the creation of the study of religion.

²⁹ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 309. Much more needs to be said about this passage. Whereas Smith sees religion as occurring in the negotiative processes of maps (traditions) and territories (human experience), here he seems to be saying that the academic study of religion has no access to religious territories. I will return to this riddle.

unpredictably, to that which is false, that which is held to be true yet lacking evidence or proof, that which is truth unquestioned, that which is the ground for truth yet is itself not subject to such concerns. Whatever the evaluation, myth is generally recognized as narrative, as story, though for most students of religion it is written text rather than story told or performed. Smith's view of place provides a context and background for his insightful studies of such classic myths as Hainuwele (Wemale of West Ceram), Io (Maori of New Zealand), and Enuma elish (Babylon). How one views myth is to Smith "the most interesting dilemma of choice confronting the student of religion." The choice is between seeing myth as an exotic or an ordinary category of human experience.³⁰ Smith chooses the latter. "In short, I hold that there is no privilege to myth or other religious materials. They must be understood primarily as texts in context, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects. . . . This implies, as well, that there is no privilege to the so-called exotic. For there is no primordium—it is all history. There is no 'other,'—it is all 'what we see in Europe every day.'"³¹

Smith borrows Kenneth Burke's definition of the proverb, applying it to myth: myth is a "strategy for dealing with a situation."³² In every one of Smith's studies of myth he places a story in its historical and cultural context and asks how it constitutes a "strategy for dealing with the situation" faced by the culture. Smith rejects a long tradition of scholarship that has upheld "a distinction between the primal moment of myth and its secondary application, between its original expression and its 'semantically depleted' explanation." He holds "that there is no pristine myth; there is only application. Myth is . . . a self-conscious category mistake. That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power."³³

Myth then is one form of religious mapping. Myth is a story concocted and told to deal with a situation at hand. It bears the tradition, but not so much a record of pristine truth or otherness revealed as the bodiment of a practical strategy for dealing with a situation. The myth of Hainuwele, for example, is, in Smith's analysis, a strategy the Ceramese used in the early twentieth century to deal with "the cargo situation," that is, the discrepancy between

³⁰ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xii.

³¹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xiii.

³² Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xiii; and Smith, "Map is Not Territory," 299.

³³ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 299; and Jonathan Z. Smith, "Good News Is No News: Aretalogy and Gospel," in *Map Is Not Territory*, 205–6.

European and Ceramese worlds.³⁴ It is in this regard like the Akitu festival (the Babylonian New Year) of many centuries earlier, which Smith shows is a ritual for the rectification of a foreign king originating in the period of Assyrian domination of Babylonia. In a careful and detailed study of a myth recorded in 1907 from the Maori of New Zealand, Smith shows that the myth must be understood in relationship to millenarian movements, widespread at the time. The story reflects and works with the complex, volatile, and transformational religious history of the time.³⁵

In “Good News Is No News,” myth is an important analytical category in Smith’s examination of the relationship between Greco-Roman aretalogies, “collections of model hagiographies and paradoxographies widespread in the period of Late Antiquity,” and Christian gospels. Smith bases his comparative study of these literatures on the recognition that both are dealing with situations at hand, that their power rests in the acknowledgment of discrepancy. Thus, both may be seen in the terms of myth. In the conclusion of this study Smith brings clarity to his view of the nature of myth.

There is delight and there is play in both the “fit” and the incongruity of the “fit,” between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world that one has encountered. Myth, properly understood, must take into account the complex processes of application and inapplicability, of congruity and incongruity. Myth shares with other genres such as the joke, the riddle and the “gospel” a perception of a possible relation between two different “things” and it delights in the play in-between.

We have need of a rhetoric of incongruity which would explore the range from joke to paradox, from riddle-contest to myth and the modes of transcendence, freedom and play each employs.³⁶

Myth is a bringing together of elements from religious tradition and elements of specific historical cultural situations.³⁷ Myth holds these together,

³⁴ Smith, *Imagining Religion*.

³⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, “A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams,” in Smith, *Imagining Religion*.

³⁶ Smith, “Good News,” 206.

³⁷ Smith’s understanding of the interrelationship between tradition and application is similar in some respects to Mikhail Bakhtin’s understanding of discourse in the novel. “The way in which the word conceptualizes its object is a complex act—all objects, open to dispute and overlain as they are with qualifications, are from one side highlighted while from the other side dimmed by heteroglot social opinion, by an alien word about them. And into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters—it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours. The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And

permitting a movement back and forth between them, examining and delighting in how they fit, or fail to fit, together. Myth is a form demanding juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought. It may precipitate solution, but its power is in its play.³⁸ In “Map Is Not Territory” Smith provides a rich statement of his theory of myth *sub specie ludi*.

There is something funny, there is something crazy about myth for it shares with the comic and the insane the quality of obsessiveness. Nothing, in principle, is allowed to elude its grasp. The myth, like the diviner’s [referring to African divination] objects, is a code capable, in theory, of universal application. But this obsessiveness, this claim to universality is relativized by the situation. There is delight and there is play in both the fit and the incongruity of the fit between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world or of experience which is encountered. It is this oscillation between “fit” and “no fit” which gives rise to thought. Myth shares with other forms of human speech such as the joke or riddle, a perception of a possible relationship between different “things.” It delights, it gains its power, knowledge and value from the play between.³⁹

Smith’s understandings of place and of myth—as well as his understanding of the academic methods of the study of religion—are species of play. Both place and myth, in Smith’s view, demand a juxtaposition, which engages comparison (the task of fit, of mapping), precipitating differences and the delight as well as the frustration in the awareness of difference.⁴⁰

an artistic representation, an ‘image’ of the object, may be penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them. If we imagine the *intention* of such a word, that is, its *directionality toward the object*, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself. . . . but rather as its spectral dispersion of an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle” Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Michael Holquist (ed.) (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 277. Notably, the play metaphor of light on the water is, I believe, based on the prototype of play being the activity distinctive to children.

³⁸ As Smith says, “The power of myth depends upon the play between the applicability and inapplicability of a given element in the myth to a given experiential situation. That some rituals rely for their power upon a confrontation between expectation and reality and use of perception of that discrepancy is an occasion for thought” (Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 308).

³⁹ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 300.

⁴⁰ It is important to note that Smith’s understanding of myth is a product of his self-conscious choices of theory. It is not a claim about some essence or nature of myth. Smith’s view of myth would,

Ritual

Ritual, which Smith understands to be one of the basic forms of religious action, is a major concern throughout his writings. He helps orient us to the complexities of the study of ritual by placing it, along with myth, in the context of our intellectual history. While myth was conceived as a study of belief, for the study of ritual “there is no question of beliefs, no problem of the endless subtlety of words, but rather, nonsense. Ritual, lacking speech, resisted decipherment. The ‘other,’ with respect to ritual, remained sheerly ‘other’—there could be no penetration behind the masks, no getting beneath the gestures. The study of ritual was born as an exercise in the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ an explanatory endeavor designed to explain away.”⁴¹

Whereas exegesis has been the mode considered proper to the study of myth, description has been the mode deemed proper for the study of ritual. Simply put, students of religion have not really known what to do with ritual other than to describe it. When pushed, we have tended to advance some notion that serves to explain it away. Smith tackles a major problem in his efforts to shape ritual theory. His theory of ritual is *sub specie ludi*, as evidenced even in the playfulness of the title of a 1974 lecture on bear-hunting rituals, “The Bare Facts of Ritual.” But it is not simply a direct translation of his view of myth. The lecture deserves careful consideration.

Smith describes hunt ritual as having several phases. The first part is the preparation for the hunt, rites performed to ensure its success, including such rites as divination, mimetic dances prefiguring the hunt, and invocations of the master of animals or guardian spirits of the hunters. Commonly a ceremonial or ritual hunt language is used. The second phase is composed of rites associated with leaving the camp. Smith describes a complex of roles and relationships that mediate the hunter and the game animals in the hunting grounds.⁴²

I think, be broadly and soundly rejected by many religious adherents. Myth, as religion, is of the scholar’s making.

⁴¹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 102.

⁴² “The forest serves as a host to the hunter, who must comport himself as a proper guest. The hunter is a host inviting the animal to feast on the gift of its own meat. The animal is host to the hunters as they feed on its flesh. The animal is a gift of the ‘Master of Animals,’ as well as being a visitor from the spirit world. The animal gives itself to the hunter. The hunter, by killing the animal, enables it to return to its ‘Supernatural Owner’ and to its home, from which it has come to earth as a visitor” (Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” in Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 59).

The third ritual phase is “the kill,” governed by complex rules of etiquette, including such things as the attitude and directional orientation of the animal as it is killed, the physical relationship between hunter and animal, the acceptable weapons, the bloodiness of the wound, the prohibited and acceptable locations of the wound on the animal’s body, and what must be spoken to the animal before it is killed. Smith holds that in this phase the controlling idea is that “the animal is not killed by the hunter’s initiative, rather the animal freely offers itself to the hunter’s weapon.”⁴³

The fourth and concluding phase of the hunt is the return to camp, which includes the etiquette of treating the corpse of the animal (often adorned or clothed); the butchering, distribution, and eating of the meat; the care and disposition of the bones; and the purification of the hunters. The emphasis here, as Smith sees it, is on the reintegration of the hunters and the game into the domestic world and the return of the soul of the animal to its home that it might regenerate flesh for another hunt.

In his characteristic fashion Smith approaches the analysis of the hunt with “some blunt questions” that arise from the obvious, yet routinely ignored, incredulity of the prescribed method of kill. He asks the simple and rather obvious question: “Can we believe that a group which depends on hunting for its food would kill an animal only if it is in a certain posture?” Pointing out that “if we accept all that we have been told on good authority, we will have accepted a ‘cuckoo-land’ where our ordinary, commonplace, commonsense understandings of reality no longer apply. We will have declared the hunter or the ‘primitive’ to be some other sort of mind, some other sort of human being, with the necessary consequence that their interpretation becomes impossible. We will have aligned religion with some cultural ‘death wish,’ for surely no society that hunted in the manner described would long survive. And we will be required, if society is held to have any sanity at all, to explain it away.”⁴⁴

Smith’s consideration of hunt ritual, foundational to the presentation of his general ritual theory, begins with the contention that the killing of hunted

⁴³ Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual,” 59.

⁴⁴ Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual,” 61. I would anticipate that many readers might feel that, far from being “primitive,” hunting peoples are in fact superior to technologically modern hunters; that their spiritual relationship with the animals, permitting them even to speak with them, enables them to hunt precisely in the terms of the prescribed hunting etiquette. In this view, which remains primitivist with different valences, all the values are reversed. It is not the hunters who have a death wish but rather those who have severed their spiritual relationships with the animals and with nature. What is most basic here is to comprehend that this view is the flip side of the “cuckoo-land” view and ultimately amounts to explaining away the hunt ritual.

animals as prescribed and enacted in hunting ritual is not and cannot be a description of the actual killing of animals. He provides ethnographic evidence. He also describes ceremonial killings in bear festivals practiced by some circumpolar peoples. For example, a bear cub may be captured and treated as a guest while it is being raised to adulthood. Under the control of a ritual environment the captive bear is killed precisely in the prescribed manner. Against these queries and observations Smith forges his ritual theory. "There appears to be a gap, an incongruity between the hunters' ideological statements of how they ought to hunt and their actual behavior while hunting. For me, it is far more important and interesting that they say this is the way they hunt than that they actually do so. For now one is obligated to find out how they resolve this discrepancy rather than to repeat, uncritically, what one has read. It is here, as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located. It is its skill at rationalization, accommodation, and adjustment."⁴⁵ This is the familiar gap in which play occurs.⁴⁶ In ritual that which is and that which ought to be are held together. Juxtaposition. In this gap a culture plays out its most creative actions, its rituals.

Attributing much weight to the occasional ceremonial killings, though not practiced by all hunting cultures, Smith argues that these rituals enact the "perfect hunt," the way a hunt "ought" to be conducted. It is through their rites, Smith proposes, that hunters fill the gap of incongruity. The actual hunt is imperfect, while the descriptions of the ritual hunt and the ceremonial killing are perfect. The hunter, having participated in the ceremonial kill, carries the knowledge of how a hunt "ought" to be performed in his mind as he conducts the imperfect actual killing of animals. From this Smith draws the conclusion that the ritual hunt closes the gap of incongruity. "The hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts; he does not think about his hunting as he says he thinks. But, unless we are to suppose that, as a 'primitive,' he is incapable of thought, we must presume that he is aware of this discrepancy; that he works with it, that he has some means of overcoming this contradiction

⁴⁵ Smith, "Bare Facts of Ritual," 62.

⁴⁶ Developing on Gregory Bateson's important discussion of play, Don Handelman provides an insightful discussion of the play function of the gap in terms of being what he terms "in the boundary." The boundary between not-play and play is constituted through the self-referential paradox that depends on qualities of processuality. "Every passage to play through a paradoxical boundary imputes processuality to the medium of play" (Don Handelman, "Passage to Play: Paradox and Process," *Play & Culture* 5, no. 1 [1992]: 1–19).

between word and deed. This work, I believe, is one of the major functions of ritual.”⁴⁷

Smith understands ritual as a controlled environment that resolves the incongruities commonly experienced in the course of life. It differs from myth, which itself creates and plays among incongruities. Ritual resolves the incongruities that are a given aspect of life, whereas myth engages a thought-provoking process, a mode of constructing meaning. Smith holds that

ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things. Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized.⁴⁸

In Smith’s understanding ritual is distinguished from nonritual in several respects. Ritual is perfect, nonritual is imperfect; ritual is special, nonritual is ordinary and everyday; ritual is controlled, nonritual is uncontrolled. Ritual is how things ought to be, nonritual is how things are.

While incongruity, gaps, and play are essential to Smith’s views of both myth and ritual, their respective roles appear to be quite distinct. Smith sees both myth and ritual as serving practical purposes, as existing only in application, only in their performance, only in meeting the need of a concrete historical cultural situation. Myth offers a second perspective on an existential situation provoking thought and action in response to the incongruity it presents when the two are juxtaposed. Because of the character of myth, the gap cannot be overcome, thus energizing the play of thought regarding fit and nonfit, a play that gives rise to meaning.

⁴⁷ Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual,” 63. Notable here is Smith’s giving rare attention to actual subjects rather than texts reporting the subjects. It is interesting that the actual behavior of real hunters (not hunters in texts) is an inference of the application of Smith’s theory.

⁴⁸ Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual,” 63. The impossibility of achieving perfection in actuality is precisely why ritual must be understood as a genre of play.

Ritual, on the other hand, is motivated by incongruities in the course of life that can never be overcome. Ritual provides the controlled environment in which perfection and order can be experienced, if but momentarily. In Smith's view, it appears that ritual tends to serve primarily a locative strategy and depends upon the establishment of the ideas, the perfect, the "ought," that is determined somehow outside of and prior to ritual, one might suppose in the play of myth.

In *To Take Place* Smith maintains the notion, worked out in "Bare Facts," that "ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are."⁴⁹ But here, despite a leaning toward the locative, he holds a more obviously playful understanding. "Ritual thus provides an occasion for reflection on and rationalization of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, what ought to have taken place did not. . . . Ritual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about."⁵⁰ This is even clearer in his comments on a description of Indic sacrificial ritual. "Ritual is a relationship of differences between 'nows'—the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place; the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of 'here' and 'there.' . . . The absolute discrepancy invites thought, but cannot be thought away. One is invited to think of the potentialities of the one 'now' in terms of the other; but the one cannot become the other. Ritual *précise*s ambiguities; it neither overcomes nor relaxes them."⁵¹

Homo Ludens: Smith as Play

In the collection of Smith's essays entitled *Map Is Not Territory*, Smith concludes many of the essays with an afterword in which he describes his thinking and reading on the topic since its earlier publication. Smith concludes the afterword to his essay on James George Frazer, entitled "When

⁴⁹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 109.

⁵⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 109–10.

⁵¹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 110. This understanding of ritual is developed by Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Bell uses the term *ritualization* to emphasize that ritual is a way of acting, a "cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures" (8).

the Bough Breaks,” with the following curious sentence: “Frazer, for me, becomes the more interesting and valuable precisely because he deliberately fails.”⁵²

In the article Smith appears to demolish both Frazer and his famous work *The Golden Bough*. In reading Smith’s article, one is dazzled by his virtuosity, tenacity, incisiveness, courage, and boldness; one is embarrassed for Frazer, for a whole tradition of scholarship, and for one’s own meager efforts too easily identifiable with the sins of the great Frazer. But then, almost too late, Smith zings us with this declaration, a conundrum really, that he actually finds Frazer interesting and valuable, and, all the more shocking, he attributes the measure of his interest to Frazer’s deliberate failure. It is a common technique in Smith’s writing to draw his readers, willing or not, kicking and screaming (either with pleasure or pain) into the play of incongruity. His study of Frazer and *The Golden Bough* provides some keys to our fuller understanding of this playful dimension of Smith’s contribution to the academic study of religion.

“When the Bough Breaks” was published in Smith’s 1978 collection *Map Is Not Territory*, having first been published in 1972 in the journal *History of Religions*. Though Smith does not acknowledge it, the article relies heavily on Part I of his 1969 Yale University doctoral dissertation entitled “The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*.” The title to Part I is “*Homo Ludens*: Frazer as Play.” In an arresting display of analysis and scholarship Smith carefully examines Frazer’s massive work. He finds that no question, no thesis, directs the work. Hence, there can be no answers, no conclusions, not really even any clear direction within the whole rambling thing. By the hundreds Smith juxtaposes Frazer’s sources with his extractions from them, showing that Frazer misquotes, misclassifies, and misinterprets the bulk of the materials he presents as documented facts. Upon Smith’s examination of Frazer’s presentation of the Scandinavian myth of Balder in light of its sources, he concludes: “I can think of no other passage of less than one hundred words in the work of any other scholar which contains a comparable number of errors of fact and interpretation.”⁵³

Is not Frazer’s work simply bad scholarship? Why should a bad scholar be considered a player? Why does Smith declare this to be of interest and value?

⁵² Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 239.

⁵³ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 237. He later would find Eliade’s treatment of the Arrernte example “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole” at least comparably in error (see Smith, *To Take Place*, 1–23).

Smith never discusses what he understands by the term “play,” and there may be good reason for that.⁵⁴ It is also not clear whether Smith intends his connection of Frazer with play to be entirely complementary, as the following passage shows:

The book which set out to explain the priesthood at Nemi has failed to accomplish this end. The work which is entitled *The Golden Bough* has, in fact, nothing to do with the golden bough. This is more serious than the simple criticism that *The Golden Bough* is a “misnomer.” It calls into question the whole purpose and intent of the vast work. . . . Frazer has produced, in *The Golden Bough*, a bad joke, and, poor comic that he was, he gave away the punch line in the first page of the Preface to Balder the Beautiful:

. . . Though I am now less than ever disposed to lay weight on the analogy between the Italian priest and the Norse god, I have allowed it to stand because it furnishes me with a pretext for discussing not only the general question of the eternal soul in popular superstition, but also the fire-festivals of Europe. . . . Thus Balder the Beautiful in my hands is little more than a stalking-horse to carry two heavy pack-loads of facts. . . . He, too, for all the quaint garb he wears, is merely a puppet, and it is time to unmask him before laying him up in the box. (*Golden Bough*, Vol. X, pp. v–vi)

Smith follows this passage by quoting the conclusion Frazer wrote to the same introduction:

I am hopeful that I may not now be taking a final leave of my indulgent readers, but that . . . they will bear with me yet a while if I should attempt to entertain them with fresh subjects of laughter and tears drawn from the comedy and tragedy of man’s endless quest after happiness and truth. (*Golden Bough*, Vol. X, p. xii)⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Notably, Jacques Derrida frequently used the term “play” with little definition or distinction. Indeed, it seems that while Derrida deconstructs every other term, “play” is the one left to stand without this attention. This distinction of play is perhaps because it is self-deconstructing, as in “to risk meaning nothing is to start to play” (Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation* [New York: Schocken Books, 1985], 69), or because there must finally be some place on which to stand, even momentarily; to deconstruct and play is in itself shifty enough to semi-ground a stance. For his discussion of play see Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (eds.), *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1970), 247–65.

⁵⁵ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 109–10.

Smith concludes, “The Bough is broken and all that it cradled has fallen. It has been broken not only by subsequent scholars, but also by the deliberate action of its author.”⁵⁶

We may feel that Smith has played a bad (or, perhaps more accurately, a “cruel”) joke on his readers, but he is no bad comic. Not only does he not give away the punch line, he persists in complicating the play, in raising the stakes. For example, in the afterword to his 1978 essay Smith shows more clearly Frazer’s joke: “Frazer, in his researches, encountered the Savage which put the axe to his Victorian confidence in Progress and, in his studies of dying gods and kings, was brought up short before the absurdity of death. The history of mankind became, for him, the attempt to transcend that which cannot be transcended—namely death, ‘no figurative or allegorical death, no poetical embroidery thrown over the skeleton, but the real death, the naked skeleton’ (*Golden Bough*, Vol. VII, p. vi). And, in the face of this ‘real death’ one can only act absurdly, or, to put it another way, all action is a joke.”⁵⁷

These remarks are made as an allusion to and brief summary of an article Smith had conceived as a companion piece to “When the Bough Breaks.” From his summary it appears likely the piece would have been drawn from Part II of “The Glory, Jest and Riddle,” especially the concluding section, “The Royal Play.” of chapter 5, “The Pattern of Divine Kingship.” Here Smith writes:

As one steps back and attempts to survey the vast panorama of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, one is struck by the fact that Frazer has combined these two attitudes [comic and tragic]. He has chosen as his subject matter the daring, tragic attempt by man to overcome death by slaying it and has chosen as his manner of approach, his style, a comic playful stance. Unless the two are indissolubly held together (by author and reader alike), unless the seriousness of each is equally perceived, there is a danger of reducing Frazer (or of Frazer reducing himself) to the maudlin and overdramatic on the one hand, to being frivolous on the other.

What Frazer has sensed in *The Golden Bough* is what later philosophers have termed the absurdity of the human condition. . . . Striving to conquer death by means of death, man asserts the reality of death, its omnipresence and omnipotence, all the more strongly. It is tragic, it is comic, it is absurd.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 239.

⁵⁷ Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” 239.

⁵⁸ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 376.

Frazer, as the chronicler of “these efforts, vain and pitiful, yet pathetic” (*Golden Bough*, Vol. IX, p. 241), adopts the necessary double-face.⁵⁹

I want to consider these quotations and Smith’s work in light of his remarks in perhaps his best-known essay, “Map Is Not Territory.” One of Smith’s favorite and most stimulating tasks is to show the absurdity of the places on which scholars stand to profess their knowledge. In contrast to Archimedes’s dictum, “Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world,”⁶⁰ Smith has the audacity to hold that

The historian has no such possibility. There are no places on which he might stand apart from the messiness of the given world. There is, for him, no real beginning, but only the plunge which he takes at some arbitrary point to avoid the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence. His standpoint is not discovered, rather it is fabricated with no claim beyond that of sheer survival. The historian’s point of view cannot sustain clear vision.

The historian’s task is to complicate not to clarify. He strives to celebrate the diversity of manners, the variety of species, the opacity of things.⁶¹

Then Smith concludes “Map Is Not Territory” with another apparent riddle developed on the map-territory metaphor. “We [academics] need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: ‘Map is not territory’—but maps are all we possess.”⁶² This statement is richly complex, highly playful, and demands careful consideration in light of the history of Smith’s work. I will examine these remarks briefly before returning to his study of Frazer.⁶³

Smith’s standard method of source criticism would seem to belie his statement that map is not territory and that we have only maps. Smith clearly holds the cited sources as territory at least in the sense of having priority or primacy over the presentations made of them. But what I think he means when he says that maps are all we have is that he understands the academic study of religion to be confined to the analysis of texts. He recognizes that

⁵⁹ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle,” 378.

⁶⁰ As quoted in Smith, “Influence of Symbols,” 129. The quotation also appears in Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 289.

⁶¹ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 289–90.

⁶² Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

⁶³ A fuller discussion of this passage is found in chapter 3, “The Ordeal of Incongruity.”

the most primary sources are still texts that purport to map some text-independent reality or territory. Smith confines his work to texts, to maps. This is consistent with the range of Smith's source criticism. He compares Frazer's presentation to the sources he cites, but he does not attempt to compare those primary textual sources with any text-independent human reality. It appears that Smith sees this "reflecting on and playing with the necessary incongruity of our own maps" as preliminary or preparatory to charting "the worlds of other men," but he does not, or at least rarely does he, go on to do so, and it would appear he either is not interested or feels it premature.

Thus, in this widely cited and highly important statement, it appears Smith both embraces and denies the map-territory distinction. He confines academic work to the comparative study of maps without regard to territories, all the while admitting that such territories at least exist. It is that we do not have these territories; we cannot have other than textual records of them. This confinement of the academic study of religion to text is particularly interesting since Smith's understanding of religion is elaborated through his carefully self-conscious development of theories of place, myth, and ritual that emphasize mapping, application, human experience, history, and society. With regard to the impact and effect on the world beyond texts, Smith writes that "it is both wonderful and unaccountable, perhaps even comic or crazy, that sometimes our playful imagination, our arguments about and mental construals of the world, turn out to have real consequences."⁶⁴

There is a major advantage in Smith's restricting the work of scholars to texts. It enables a comparative task that leads to a measure of objective accomplishment, that is, conclusiveness. In the frame of comparing map with map, text with text, while excluding consideration of the map- and text-independent realities, the results are conclusive and seemingly inarguable. In this relative domain Smith can be certain of the territory. Interestingly, in contrast to his own dictum, he has a very firm place on which to stand.⁶⁵ So, for example, in his study of Frazer's presentation of the Balder myth Smith's comparison supports the frank and unqualified conclusion that Frazer's presentation is loaded with "errors of fact and interpretation." This stance is taken in many of Smith's studies. He reveals the incongruities through comparison. And in these comparative operations Smith is unhesitating and

⁶⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Playful Acts of Imagination," *Liberal Education* 73, no. 5 (1978): 18.

⁶⁵ And it is not an arbitrary choice.

forthright in declaring presentation of fact and interpretation as either accurate or in error.

But why does Smith go to such lengths to compare presentations with source texts? The case of Frazer is especially revealing. Smith reports that Frazer's earliest critics recognized his failure and that Frazer himself acknowledged his failure as deliberate.⁶⁶ So what could possibly motivate Smith's exhaustive comparative analysis? That is, if it is a foregone conclusion that Frazer at least acknowledged his failure, it would not seem worth the enormous effort of Smith's analysis simply to verify Frazer's statement. Thus, it would seem that Smith was principally interested in how Frazer failed. This, indeed, is what his analysis shows, that is, that Frazer is *homo ludens*. According to Smith, Frazer knowingly and deliberately construed his sources to deal with issues other than those he stated as his purpose. He was perpetrating a joke and therein, in Smith's view, lies the glory of the work. Smith praises Frazer finally for his approach and style, which Smith identifies as "a comic playful stance."⁶⁷

In this study I believe that Smith forges his understanding of the role of the religion scholar. Though Smith is able to cite Frazer (in the preface to the tenth volume!)⁶⁸ to show that his intention was other than what he had stated, it is actually Smith's study that reveals the humor of Frazer's work and illuminates the distinctiveness of its character as a riddle and joke. Smith does not do this by an interpretation of Frazer's work alone but only through the exhaustive, tedious, but ultimately exciting examination of how Frazer creatively used his sources. This revelation, or I would suggest construction, is apparently worth the extent of Smith's effort, and we must attempt to understand why. I do not believe that Frazer's work can be interesting on the terms Smith states apart from Smith's study of it. Whereas Smith calls Frazer a poor comic, having produced a bad joke, apart from Smith's analysis I don't think any reader would find Frazer a comic at all. We would no more see

⁶⁶ Smith depends here solely, it seems, on the prefatory statements to volume 10, which, as he notes, were omitted by Frazer from the abridged edition; thus "countless readers who have read the work in this edition have not been 'in on the joke'" (Smith, "When the Bough Breaks," 238 n. 96). This is yet too liberal, because few readers—one can scarcely imagine any other than Smith—have understood *The Golden Bough* in light of the selected prefatory comments to the tenth volume.

⁶⁷ Recalling Smith's studies of Eliade, we might suppose that Eliade's failure was less interesting to Smith because he did not find Eliade to be a player.

⁶⁸ I doubt that any reader of *The Golden Bough* would find these brief statements as central to framing an interpretation of the whole enormous work. Thus, I am far less convinced than Smith that Frazer's failure was a persistent self-conscious motivation.

the bad joke than we would recognize the many errors in his presentation of Balder.

Smith is perpetrating a joke himself. He, much more than Frazer, is the player, the trickster. As Frazer did with Balder, Smith does with Frazer, but much more ingeniously and self-consciously. He reworks his source maps in order to deal with issues other than those explicitly stated. Religion, for Smith, is the invention of scholars, a product of scholarly maps and mappings. While the maps appear to be about “the worlds of other men,” the joke is that they are only about the worlds of the scholars who must “reflect and play on” them to work out their own issues. It is, as shown earlier, surprising to Smith when our work actually has any effect on the real world of men. Smith, like Frazer, is interested in the priesthood of Nemi and the Scandinavian myth of Balder (indeed, he is interested in Frazer and his work) primarily because these subjects provide the symbols by which academic maps are drawn. They were both interested only in the texts, the maps, that are articulated in the terms “of other men.” Smith is showing that this territorial analogy reveals what distinguishes the academic enterprise. Religion, as a modern, Western, academic invention, comprises only what we write about it.

Through the detailed objective comparison of map (e.g., Frazer’s *Golden Bough* or Eliade’s report on the Arrernte) with territory (the ethnographic and literary sources) Smith is able to demonstrate that scholars do not simply objectively present their subjects; indeed, they often do not even present a legitimate face of their subjects. What they do is to recreate their subjects in terms that meet their own needs, both personal and academic. Smith shows that Frazer actually recreates Balder for his own purposes, the attempt to transcend death, and that the loads of facts Balder, as stalking horse, is made to carry are concocted by none other than Frazer himself.

Shockingly, Smith shows that what we have thought to be the territory of religion—the substance and subjects of the works of scholars like Frazer and Eliade who seem to inundate us with factual information about scholar-independent realities—actually comprises projections of scholarly maps. The joke, it would seem, is that there are no territories, or that real territories are inaccessible to the scholar. The joke is that for the study of religion there is no territory, only maps made to resemble it. Recognizing the joke illuminates Smith’s view of the mapterritory distinction as the metaphor by which to distinguish scholarship. In Jean Baudrillard’s terms, what scholars

have presented us has been a “precession of simulacra” rather than reality.⁶⁹ And this work is what, as scholars, we are in the business to do. It would seem clarifying to me now to rephrase Korzybski’s statement as “Map is now territory,” which renders the rest, that is, any play between map and territory, completely absurd. Smith’s conclusions are the same as Frazer’s, the holding at once of the comic and tragic views, the double-face.

I believe that Smith is fully aware of this absurdity and that his work finally does not embrace playing this absurdity endlessly as in a sandbox. Our only choice, as he puts it, is “the plunge” that avoids “the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence.” It is, as Smith states, a standpoint “fabricated with no claim beyond that of sheer survival.” This is the full force of play in Smith’s approach—the choosing, the assumption of a standpoint, however temporary, and while fully acknowledging its absurdity.

To take a stance, in this complex, multicultural world, without recognizing its absurdity is either religious, narrow-minded, or naive. To refuse to take any stance at all is either to indulge infinite regress, a favorite of many postmodernists, or silence. The alternative, which is at least more interesting, is the perspective of play: seriously taking a stance while acknowledging its absurdity. Scholarship, as Frazer found, is like life in that it must go on despite its absurdity.

Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*

What might a study of religion look like if conducted *sub specie ludi*? Let me conclude by attempting to summarize, extend, and develop some of the ideas suggested by Smith.

The heritage of the academic study of religion, what Milan Kundera has called “the deep well of the past,” is the Western intellectual development of recent centuries. It is distinguished by literacy, by second-order criticism, by the growing awareness of cultural and religious multiplicity, and by the consequent increasing problematization of the foundations of Western perspectives. This questioning is due either to the rigorous analysis of these foundations or to the growing awareness that the Western claim to truth and finality is but one among manifold such claims among peoples around the

⁶⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1ff.

world.⁷⁰ Religion, as a generic category, is inseparable from the Western effort to learn how to live morally and meaningfully as modern citizens of a complex world.

Play, as demonstrated to us by Smith as a double-face, is holding at once comic and tragic perspectives, the oscillatory and iterative negotiation of fit, the acknowledgment that we must stand somewhere despite knowing that there is ultimately no justifiable place on which to stand to comprehend the world. To embrace this absurdity is particularly suited, one might even say singularly so, as the attitude for the modern academic study of religion. It is the perspective from which we can simultaneously embrace two or more opposing positions without declaring ourselves mad. Indeed, through descriptors such as joke, humor, laughter, and play we can see the analogy between what we do as serious academics and what children, athletes, chess competitors, and novelists do with equal seriousness.

Smith suggests we take an attitude toward what we do that corresponds with the attitude expressed by other players when they say, “It is just a game” or “It is only play;” to say “This is religion” is parallel to the statement “This is play,” as Gregory Bateson has discussed it. He expands the statement as “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote.”⁷¹ Invoking Korzybski’s map-territory relation, Bateson gets right to the point: “A message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes (‘The word “cat” cannot scratch us’). Rather, language bears to the object which it denotes a relationship comparable to that which a map bears to a territory. Denotative communication as it occurs at the human level is only possible *after* the evolution of a complex set of metalinguistic (but not verbalized) rules which govern how words and sentences shall be related to objects and events.”⁷²

Religion (generic), I argue, is the construction of a metalanguage that makes possible some general comprehension and discourse about what is religious. The academic study of religion, like the signs that communicate the message “This is play,” is on the order of metacommunication.

Humor as presented by Milan Kundera in his *Testaments Betrayed* is parallel to play. Kundera believes that humor characterizes the distinctive

⁷⁰ Awareness of others and reflections on the implications of multiplicity were enabled, if not directly caused, by the media expansion of print. This is particularly important now as we are beginning to understand the effects of expansion into hypertextual media.

⁷¹ Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” in Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 180.

⁷² Bateson, “Theory of Play,” 180.

perspective of the novel. Humor is “not laughter, not mockery, not satire, but a particular species of the comic which renders ambiguous everything it touches.”⁷³ And humor is that “intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty.”⁷⁴ Humor, as Kundera understands it, characterizes the novel as “*a realm where moral judgment is suspended*. Suspending moral judgment is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality*.”⁷⁵ A novel is characterized by humor, implemented by the suspension of moral judgment, and Kundera criticizes recent works presented as novels that he believes are intent upon making such judgments.

Kundera’s explanation of his position is important for the insights I want to draw from it. “Western society habitually presents itself as the society of the rights of man; but before a man could have rights, he had to constitute himself as an individual, to consider himself such and to be considered such; that could not happen without the long experience of the European arts and particularly of the art of the novel, which teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own.”⁷⁶ The novel is a method of inquiry and presentation that is particularly suited to the modern world, a complex world of diverse peoples. Kundera sharply contrasts the perspective of the novel with a religious perspective. The novel in its embracing of humor requires an exploration of myths and sacred texts that renders them profane; that is, it removes the sacred from the temple: “Insofar as laughter invisibly pervades the air of the novel, profanation by novel is the worst there is. For religion and humor are incompatible.”⁷⁷

This discussion of humor is instructive for how students of religion (generic) should research and write. It is only by profanation, by taking the sacred out of the temple, that students of religion may even begin to grasp religion. Given that our subjects are culturally and historically specific religions, our only attitude can be that of play or humor as Kundera presents it.

Thus, the academic student of religion is like the novelist in some respects. It is her or his job to create the world of religion, knowing full well that all that exists of religion (the generic) is what students of religion write of it. In this respect we are storytellers, concocting tales of “other men.” These

⁷³ Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 5–6.

⁷⁴ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 32–33.

⁷⁵ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 7.

⁷⁶ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 8.

⁷⁷ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 9.

fictive narratives give us the terms, categories, perspectives, and methods with which to comprehend the complexities of the choices we have. Without honoring the impossibility of truth and ultimate reality in the modern, complexly plural world, truth and reality have no meaning at all. Without upholding differences as unresolvable, which from the perspective of most of our subjects would threaten the core of their existence, differences are either denied or disguised or glibly digested into cheap and empty universals.

Upon accepting the mantle of storytelling, we lay aside the role of discovering truth, of reporting objective reality. In doing so we must experience the freedom and responsibility of the storyteller to make her or his stories, and the telling of them, as engaging and as profound as possible so as, in Kundera's terms, to incite the reader of our work "to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own."⁷⁸

But we are not like the novelist in at least one important respect. The subjects of our stories are real people. We cannot go about our task assuming that what we do does not affect the real worlds of actual people that give inspiration to our fictions. Thus, for me, the fullest range of play, the greatest absurdity, is that, because our knowledge is always in some respects a product of our theories, we can never objectively know those whom we choose as our subjects, but we are nonetheless always in interaction with them, as partners in a dance.⁷⁹ Our particular kinds of stories cannot exist without our real subjects. Whereas the novel is distinguished by its being totally hyperreal,⁸⁰ the humor extends much more deeply for students of religion. Novels deal with truth and reality, not as the distinction of their content but as they interrelate with the real lives of their authors and readers, that is, in their being written and read. While students of religion must acknowledge that our writings are fictive, in that they are the products of our theoretical perspectives, we must constrain these fictions by the real and independent presence of "the worlds of other men." *Sub specie ludi*, the study of religion resolves, by embracing it, the paradox that our subject reality is and must be independent of us, while our attempts to understand it, in some measure, make our subject dependent upon us.⁸¹

⁷⁸ I am increasingly convinced that the standards and conventions of academic writing and speaking greatly inhibit the creative potential of our work. We must take advantage of much more expansive and creative modes of research and presentation as offered, for example, by the internet. We must explore media more compatible with play and humor.

⁷⁹ This creative encounter, this partner dancing, is the subject of my *Creative Encounters*.

⁸⁰ Though, of course, there are mixed genres such as historical novel.

⁸¹ A much fuller discussion of this relationship may be found in chapter 3, "The Ordeal of Incongruity."

Our academic play, like any, is bound by the rules that distinguish the activity. Our subjects may support many profiles and show many faces through the acts of our interpretations—they are puppets of our choices of theory. Still, underlying our understanding of what is academic is the philosophical assumption that our subjects exist independent of what we write of them. Thus, academic writing is distinguished from the novel by our acknowledgment that we cannot say simply anything we want about our subjects. As academics, we are bound by the rules of our play to have our stories constrained by our real subjects.

What we write then is hyperreal, but it must also be real. It is hyperreal in that it is distinguished, on the one hand, by imaginative academics creating stories, arguing hypotheses, and concocting theories. All these are fictions to be judged only in terms of the history of similar writings. Yet, on the other hand, writings of the academic study of religion must also be demonstrably grounded in the author-independent reality of the subject. Smith shows us the methods by which we can evaluate the legitimacy of academic work, but, because he appears to limit his concern largely to the world of texts, I do not think he goes far enough to ensure that scholarship is held to be responsible to the actual subject.⁸² Without this grounding—albeit a fictive grounding since it is ultimately impossible and, thus, the necessity for a play perspective—what we do is finally not academic at all.

The “no place” on which we may stand is the fictive narrative, the narrative comprising such terms as “myth,” “ritual,” “place,” “mapping,” “comparison,” “criticism,” and “text,” none of which exists, at least in the generic sense, in the worlds of our subjects. This “no place” is the “fabrication with no claim beyond that of sheer survival” where we may stand to attempt to comprehend the most confounding and urgent issues that distinguish the world in which we live.

⁸² This limitation tends to relieve us of the responsibility to be constrained by our subject. I believe there is a major difference between creatively interpreting one’s subject and an illegitimate, unconstrained concoction. We must promote the former and discourage the latter.

The Ordeal of Incongruity

Jonathan Z. Smith and Experience

Dancing and Moving: A Somewhat Personal Introduction

There have been lots of jitters and jerks in my academic endeavors over the last thirty years (or I could just as well go ahead and make that fifty years), but reflection on the whole trajectory reveals something of a unified expanding (or focusing, I suppose) trajectory. The many activities I've experienced over these several decades have led me progressively toward appreciating the broad implications of self-movement; movement that occurs from active body processes, as opposed to passive body transport.¹ I believe that there is a primacy to self-movement, as suggested by the slightly redundant term "animate organism," Edmund Husserl's used to describe us humans and our biological kin. My personal path has been not so much a series of shifts from one interest to the next as it has been a broadening and enriching inclusiveness or extensiveness. It started with my rediscovery of my own body in the process of addressing a midlife crisis. I've had a few. Now I'm having end-of-life crises, which I'm finding are much harder; these too are tracked by self-movement. My strategy over the decades, seemingly now rather accidental, was to focus on gaining some sense of physical fitness by moving my body about, something my academic lifestyle had for decades strongly

¹ I use the somewhat inelegant term "self-moving" to clearly distinguish it from passive movement, as in moving in a vehicle, requiring nothing of our bodies save our derrières. I was initially made aware of the importance of self-moving in the classic scientific experiment done on kittens. This experiment involved dividing newborn (thus sightless) kittens into two groups. They were kept in the dark much of the time, but when they were in the lighted areas, one group was allowed, as normal kittens, to grope about their environments, bumping into objects and exploring through physical encounter. The other group could move only passively by being attached to little carts connected to the self-moving kittens. Sorry, I know this story is a little offensive. The results were that the self-moving kittens developed normal sight as usual, the non-self-moving kittens did not. After a critical period without developing sight, they never did gain sight. See Richard Held and Alan Hein, "Movement-Produced Stimulation in the Development of Visually Guided Behavior," *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology* 56, no. 5 (1963): 872–76.

discouraged. How odd it is that so many of our professions and lifestyle choices tend to debody us to some extent,² that is, to discourage the extent of our self-movement.³ It is a radical shift from the farmer lifestyle of my immediate heritage, a shift increasingly experienced over the last century. My early (thirty years ago now) self-moving experience was jarring, yet in a positive way. Despite the many aches and pains that were inevitable to my long dormant body, it was an awakening (a quickening) to actually feel myself moving and to realize (or to hope) that I might eventually be capable of moving my own body about with something like rhythm and grace.

For decades, at that time of awakening, I had studied Native American religions. I had not only read extensively, I had also spent lots of time hanging out in Native American communities. As I newly experienced my own movement awareness, I was pleasantly surprised that it connected with the things I had long loved to experience in Native American communities: ritual and dancing and drama and masking; I had come to understand that their religions are inseparable from dancing and ritual drama. I soon realized that the same religion-dance connection is and has been common among cultures across the globe and throughout history. Religions, most everywhere other than in northern hemisphere Christianities,⁴ are often considered nearly synonymous with dancing.

Protestant Christianity has tended to associate dancing with the sensuous and sexual body; it has considered body unreliable and prone to sin,

² Following Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, I tend to avoid the term “embody” and thus “disembody” because these terms imply that we are not primarily body, but that we are housed in or moved about by being *in* a body. I firmly believe that we are primarily body—although with a rich sense of the body—and that we exist *as* body rather than *in* body. See Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2nd ed., 2011).

³ It is not only our professions that limit our body movement, it is also limited by our cultural and historical habits and expectations. While preschool kids run everywhere, by the time they start school they are discouraged from moving about. Oddly this movement discouragement is often linked with how we expect kids to learn. This movement discouragement continues and progressively so through the life cycle. Is it any wonder that the image we have of older folks is one of bent-over (kyphotic) posture, of motility that requires the assistance of a cane? Recent studies show that longevity is linked, especially among those a bit older, to the speed of quotidian walking.

⁴ I distinguish northern from southern hemisphere Christianities in that southern hemisphere Christianities commonly are the more recent results of Christian proselytization that has tended to complement the local religious traditions rather than replacing them. The correlation is certainly not perfect, but by making the distinction I hope to jar the reader into a couple of reflections. One is that I don't think it accurate or appropriate to consider Christianity as monolithic and that, despite the core idea of exclusiveness in much of northern hemisphere Christian theology and doctrine, almost all of the communities I've had experience with have been very comfortable engaging Christianity without any threat to their older and continuing traditions. This is true of Native Americans (obviously, many of these are northern hemisphere) and Africans, Latin Americans, Australians, and Southeast Asians.

recognizing soul or spirit (some nonmaterial essence) as more valued than body. Thus, dancing is and has been often discouraged, if not forbidden, by these Christian traditions. With the mid-twentieth-century significant expansion of the academic study of religion particularly to include cultures throughout the world, one might have expected that dancing would have been quickly recognized as an important comparative category; after all, it is done by most religious cultures and is often considered essential. Yet the attitudes (or gestural naturalizations) of the religious lineage of the academic study of religion, being so strongly aligned with Protestant Christian values, made it unlikely that dancing would be seen as even relevant to any study of religion.⁵ And so it has been ignored, as has movement and things body-related, other than somewhat recently as niche studies. The comparative study of dancing in cultures across the globe has been left to anthropology, particularly to the small subfield dance anthropology.⁶ There has been nothing similar to dance anthropology in the study of religion. But then the study of ritual and even prayer has not been developed adequately either; this neglect seems astounding to me.⁷ Where the term “movement” occurs as a subject in the academic study of religion, it mostly indicates religious movements as developments of beliefs or the expanding presence of specific religious traditions across time and space.⁸ This usage has not indicated what I clumsily refer to as self-movement, that is, the awareness of and intention to

⁵ For many years I taught religion and dance courses. A significant portion of the students who enrolled indicated that they took the course in part because they couldn't imagine how such a course could even be possible. Interestingly, once they studied a couple dozen cultures where religion and dancing are so extensively entwined, when they came to the Christian traditions many expressed disappointment that their own religion (most students were Christian) had so decisively excluded dancing.

⁶ It is of interest that in the academic context, the study of music has commonly deserved an entire “school” where dancing, if it exists at all, is often a subfield in the department of theater. Furthermore, the study of music and dancing across the globe has also not been at all equal. While it is clear that ethnomusicology is a very small field, it is much more prominent and developed than is dance anthropology.

⁷ My dissertation at the University of Chicago was on Navajo prayer. For that I attempted to place this specific study in the context of the broad academic study of prayer. I had expected it to be long and rich since few things are more common or representative of religion than is prayer. I was shocked to find few studies of prayer, particularly as a common comparative category inclusive of the prayer traditions and practices of many religious cultures. I suspect that one of the reasons prayer is routinely ignored (of course, there are extensive literatures within specific traditions) is because it is highly repetitive and bound closely to ritual practice. In a recent return to my studies of Navajo prayer I attempted to value repetition and the ritual context common to prayer and to consider the implications of this effort on our understanding of religion. See “As Prayer Goes So Goes Religion” in my *Creative Encounters*, 147–66.

⁸ Examples are found in Thomas Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Manuel Vasquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

move one's body. My efforts have been to suggest the significant potential of the study of dancing to both the study of religion and also to the appreciation of what distinguishes being human; beyond dancing to self-moving body and to related matters such as posture and gesture; and to the evolutionary development of human biology. These perspectives will be much more fully developed in chapter 5, "Smith's Golden Bough: Moving Toward a Proper Academic Study of Religion."

In my studies of dancing in a worldwide comparative framework I had to ask, "What is dancing?" and to pursue the question apart from the traditional dance theories that focused on dance as art—where ballet is "*the* dance" at the center of "*the* dance world"—and dancing as entertainment.⁹ To locate dancing as inseparable from religion, I found it necessary to ask larger questions, such as, "What is there about dancing that is distinctive to human beings?" and "What about dancing is particularly important and suited to so many religions?" In pursuit of such questions, I eagerly sought both philosophical and biological insights as well as the broadly ranging evidence of the dancings of many cultures as important to their religious and cultural identities, world-senses,¹⁰ art, and agency.

A rich, if limited, body of academic literature allowed me to connect biology and philosophy in the terms of self-movement.¹¹ While continuing to read extensively on many fronts, I spent the better part of two decades foregrounding my life of moving and dancing, by my own regular dancing as well as by traveling to learn and study dances. For a dozen years, I taught a course on religion and dancing that included weekly dance studios. The course eventually became a yearlong sequence covering thirty cultures with corresponding dancing studios for each culture taught by dancers from these cultures. In the late 1990s I opened a dance and music studio that served the community for nearly a decade. I sponsored cultural exchange visas (it was prior to September 11, 2001) for around twenty-five dancers and musicians from various African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American countries. These

⁹ There are, of course, many other functions we associate with dancing: fitness, social interaction and activities, fun, sport, competition, etiquette and manners, group identity formation, and so on. I've studied many of these.

¹⁰ My inspiration for using the term "worldsense" rather than "worldview" is Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1982), where he suggests the limitations of the domination of the senses by vision. And there is also the extensive literature of sensory anthropology.

¹¹ In the area of philosophy, I found of particular value the works of Michel Serres, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Renaud Barbaras, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Daniel Heller-Roazen. The science writings I found most exciting were by Nikolai Bernstein, Alain Berthoz, Andre Leroi-Gourhan, and Gerald Edelman.

artists from so many cultures, teaching and being integrated in the local community, comprised something of a cultural and social movement as well as one in the arts. Many of these artists-of-color married into the local community, and there has come to be an extensive generation of kids, some now approaching adulthood, that will long carry on this creative community.

I taught courses on religion and body, dance theory, religion and senses, and gesture. I traveled to Africa (Ghana and Mali), to Indonesia (Bali and Java), to Latin America (Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic) to learn and observe their dances. At some point many years into this process I realized that what I experienced leading a life of constant and intensive movement was that I was being remade, not as body or mind, but as a person; it was a whole-person makeover effected by movement practice. It was not a process of intended change (I did not set out to do this); it was simply an unexpected outcome of my obsession with dancing and moving driven by my love of it all; it continues to the present.

In time, I finally found myself drawn again to attempt to write from the perspective of my remade, bodied, self-moving being. Yet no longer could my writing be done from what seems to me an artificially distant and objective perspective, as is common to academic writing. Thus, while I suspect some may not approve of the slightly personal intro to this chapter, it is a chapter about experience. The issues and concerns that, for me, came out of this personal experience focused increasingly on (though it seems an expansion to) an emphasis on the self-moving body as constitutive of being human. I came to see, to know through experience, that concepts are not something acquired in strictly abstract intellectual operations, as seems so entrenched in our typical and treasured educational environment. Rather concepts are corporeal, inseparable from and based in bodied experience. Concepts are born in gesture and posture. Even the most seemingly abstract of concepts are grounded in some fundamental way on such distinctions as in/out, above/below, before/behind, fit/incongruity, and so on; all of these are acquired as life makes itself present by self-moving, through means of the very particular style and mechanics of self-moving that distinguishes human-specific bodies. Movement is enabled and restricted by the specific biological composition of each animate species. I came to feel that the body/mind problem (I hesitate to even mention it, since I know how even the slash-joined term triggers an entire arena of gesturally naturalized implications that I want to discourage or, better, never engage) that has so obsessed and shaped us is also based on bodied experience, experience that usually corresponds

with lives discouraging self-movement. I came to feel that there is no solution to the mind/body problem; it is rather like attempting to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Rather than resolution, a different beginning set of assumptions is required, and I find self-moving a promising candidate for this rebeginning. We must imagine human distinctiveness in terms that presume a wholeness, prior to the breaking apart into constituents such as mind and body. In my experience, self-movement is of the whole being while requiring a plethora of biological subsystems working in organic coordination; we are foremost, using Husserl term again, animate organisms.

Biology of Experience

My poster child/image for our biological distinctiveness came to be proprioception/kinesthesia, key to the biology of movement/perception that was anticipated long ago by Étienne Bonnet de Condillac (1714–1780) and by Françoise Pierre-Gonthier Maine de Biran (1766–1824), among others.¹² Awareness, consciousness, a sense of self arises from moving and its near synonymy with touching. Proprioceptors (literally, self-receptors) are the receptors that reside, by the billions, in ligaments and muscles that might be considered part of either the nervous system or the skeletomuscular system. They biologically represent the identity and inseparability of the moving muscled body and the brained/minded body. Proprioceptors also have the magical attribute of giving us the feeling of moving; we commonly call this sensation *kinesthesia*. How remarkable it is that we feel ourselves moving; the very notion seems almost incomprehensible. As Condillac and Maine de Biran posited, our sense of self, our identity, our engagement of ourselves as a subject inseparable from an object is born of this capacity to feel ourselves moving. The feeling of moving is, in some sense, what we know as *experience*, and it gives the remarkable sense of ownership all experience has. We say we experience something when we have an awareness of it; I have come to appreciate that awareness is inseparable from self-moving.

The body is comprised of corporeal concepts; it is not that we have bodies that then obtain concepts. Our corporeal concepts are grounded in our felt self-moving; our awareness of self-moving is what we call experience (in one

¹² See Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of Sensation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 219–52.

sense, at least). While we may describe an aspect of our being as mind or intellect (biologically it is presently common, fashionable, to call it “brain” and give it, erroneously I believe, a place of primacy in agency,¹³ ignoring that the nervous system extends through every part of the body) and consider it somehow apart from body or say that, when the mind/brain is active, the body is often (or should be) inactive: “Sit down, shut up, keep your hands to yourself so you can learn.” Yet elementary biology assures us that fundamentally we are animate organisms, self-moving, aware, complex beings. Focusing on our brute physical muscularity, we may describe an aspect of our being as body, yet, again, elementary biology assures us that living bodies cannot exist or move or do anything apart from being also a nervous system, itself physical and biological.¹⁴ The mind/body notion of our distinctiveness is itself a corporeal concept constructed in a specific historical cultural context—one, I must stress, that has led to a very strange sense of self-understanding, one that requires that we ignore the most banal and obvious alternatives.

Finding myself remade through self-moving, I realized that I had gained a great appreciation for repetition and routinization of movement, recognizing these patterns of movement fundamental to the construction of concepts. Repetition and routinization are not the equivalent of the mechanical, and they do not equate with the psychologically boring, nor are they to be dismissed as meaningless. They are essential to acquiring skill and acumen and the capacity to be creative. Gesture must be appreciated as a way to acquire and enact markers of individuality and culture, that is, identity. Gesture is practice and offers routinized experiences that, over time, build the basis for feeling that things fit or do not, that things cohere or do not. Gesture accumulates the sense of rightness that is the basis for both the feelings of things being just-so as well as the experience of surprise and felt incongruity, neither of which is ontologically given, that is, natural.¹⁵ Gesture provides the

¹³ Although this issue deserves much fuller discussion, which I’ll do in a different publication, at least a brief comment here is appropriate. It is likely legitimate to say that one’s behavior is influenced by the architecture of the brain (that seems obvious) and also by existing brain pathologies. Yet to say, as even some neuroscientists do, that “my brain made me do it” or “I do this because that’s what my brain has decided” or any of the endless variations on these statements seems to me a serious misunderstanding of both brain and what constitutes agency and self. Agency and self are surely of the whole person located in a complex context. To limit agency and will to but one organ seems decidedly inappropriate.

¹⁴ And, of course, to distinguish human beings as comprising only the brute physical body and the brain (or even the nervous system) is to ignore so many other aspects of even our basic biology.

¹⁵ I have worked long on understanding how it is that we feel some things as coherent and some as incoherent. Clearly these are not naturally or ontologically based (for the most part anyway). Thus,

basis for what feels natural and coherent, even when these qualities are not of nature, not ontological. Gestural naturalization is foundational to there being deeply felt and convicted differences between people and cultures and religions.¹⁶

The appreciation of gestural naturalization, supporting a feeling kind of knowing, gives rise to the promised potential of comparison as a core method/technique for a proper academic study of religion. I have found increasingly unsatisfactory our academic and cultural efforts to discover, discern, or define meaning; I have come to think that meaning may be overrated. To seemingly discern meaning is to halt the ongoing processes that should be nurtured. As Henri Bergson noted, meaning (or our discerning of some statement of meaning) halts movement,¹⁷ forces endings, perhaps (always?) prematurely. Coherence is experience that is always contextual and situational and yet is experienced usually as evident and convicted, as being just-so. Then too, the experience of incongruity engenders not only thought, as Smith (based on Paul Ricoeur) so often proclaimed, but also action, movement.

While my experiences dancing, gesturing, self-moving have occurred mostly outside of religious contexts, they have not felt unrelated, perhaps because my interests in religion have been directed to ritual and story, dancing and singing, technology and making. I began to realize that self-movement—particularly as gesture and also as posture and prosthesis¹⁸—is

there has to exist some basis that has been developed prior to the experience, the feeling, of coherence/incoherence. It has to be pervasive, it has to feel natural (even though it is not), for us to experience difference or sameness, coherence or incoherence. My sense is that the basis is bodied as gestural naturalization, that is, the repeated patterns of movement that are confirmed by the connection with the world as just-so, that is, as feeling natural. Although I know there is a sense of looseness in the term “rightness,” I use it because it is perhaps the term most commonly used to express the feeling knowledge of coherence. I have also found that it is grounded in scientific studies of human movement, as I’ll develop later.

¹⁶ I resort to a default embrace of this principle on a regular basis in the present world characterized by such radical division. For my own sanity, I have had to find a way to understand that apart from apparent reason and evidence (facts and principled argumentation) there are divides that seem ontological, that is, based on entirely different worlds. In the stress of attempting to comprehend others who appear so utterly different that there is no bridge between us, it is important to appreciate that concepts are corporeally based on gestural naturalizations. Thus, different gestural habits may produce radically different conceptual frameworks that may be experienced as nearly separate and unbridgeable.

¹⁷ Bergson actually referred to it as the “retrograde movement to the truth.” See Henri Bergson, “Retrograde Movement to the Truth,” in *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, [1946] 2007), 1–17.

¹⁸ I’ll develop the notion of the prosthetic aspect of self-movement at another time, but what I intend is that movement is always in the context of an environment; self-moving is always moving in relation to other, the environing world. Thus, the felt experience of moving extends our

inseparable from the core notions/actions/practices that are so commonly identified with religion.¹⁹ I was and continue to be shocked (to the point of incomprehension) by the common identification of what is often referred to as “religious experience” with terms like “spiritual,” “out of body,” “mystical,” and the generic “special.” In my half century of encountering religious folks all over the globe, religion is something experienced by everyone much of the time, every day, in the most common and banal moments of life. For me it is odd to ask whether or not experience is an appropriate topic for the study of religion or if it is even possible to study something so commonly understood (yet I think maybe often misunderstood) as internal or beyond body.²⁰

Smith and the Complex Issues of Experience

Despite it taking more than half of my academic career (three decades) foregrounding my experience of constant self-moving to finally attempt some articulation of what I have experienced, I had never ceased to be deeply inspired by and informed by the important and extensive work of Jonathan Smith. For fifty years he has exemplified for me what a proper academic study

awareness beyond the limitations of the physical body and thus, as Renaud Barbaras so powerfully demonstrates, self-moving is inseparable from perceptions. Prosthesis is an extension beyond the physical limitations of the body. In the realm of religion, I suggest that this prosthetic power of self-movement is foundational to experiences of transcendence, initially a transcendence in perception, yet as extended a transcendence to the fullest imaginable other, as commonly attended to by religions. For fuller discussion (although not what it will finally deserve) see Part IV, “Gesture,” and especially chapter 10, “Gesture Posture Prosthesis,” of my *Creative Encounters*.

¹⁹ While I continue to sustain an interest in dancing, as evident by my *Dancing Culture Religion*, I have shifted much of my academic interests to the broader concerns with the human senses; movement, particularly self-movement (as opposed to the passive transport of body from one place to another); gesture, posture, and prosthesis; and body that avoids the ruinous Cartesian heritage of the bifurcation of body into parts before it can be whole. In the process I have increasingly come to appreciate the importance of experience—and its close, near identity, with touch and self-moving—as foundational to awareness, to perception, to conceptualization, to sense of self (identity), to awareness of other even extended to the horizon notions that give rise to ideas of transcendence and the beyond. I have been increasingly fascinated by the potential of foregrounding the self-moving body in my efforts to understand and appreciate my own humanity and certainly what distinctively human qualities and capacities I share with all others. Given the absence of like interests among students of religion, at least in my limited awareness, I would have been happy to leave religion, my efforts to contribute to the study of religion, aside and focus on dancing, moving, gesturing, the senses, and experience. Yet perhaps because of my own gestural naturalization of thinking and writing about religion, of relating my own experiences to the ongoing process of attempting to illuminate the vast potential of a proper academic study of religion, these things have been a gravitational field persistently pulling me back to things related to religion.

²⁰ For a fuller discussion of this topic see chapter 3, “I Don’t Want to Be a Mystic! On Self-Moving and Religious Experience,” in my *Creative Encounters*.

of religion should be. I have read and reread most of what he has published and I have consistently found myself inspired by his work, always discovering new and surprising things with every rereading, always and even surprisingly directly relevant to my own interests. It little bothered me that Smith often expressed irritation and disdain for technology when I have been a technology junkie and have written about religion and technology.²¹ It little bothered me that, quite in contrast with Smith, who often proclaimed that he preferred to study “dead” religions so he can avoid ever encountering his subjects in the flesh (so to speak), my development has been toward finding experience both in my own personal life and by seeking experience (often including dancing) of the religious cultures I’ve studied as importantly complementary to the more typical intellectual activities (for Smith, reading). I have tended to find the bodied sensual aspects of intellectual work—so often movement-discouraging—also importantly determinative to academic outcomes. For my work, sweat equity has built my most treasured asset.

While there may have been some sense of compartmentalization on my part, easily justified by the awareness of my pygmy intellect compared with Smith’s outsized intellect, I believe that I always sensed that it isn’t acceptable to be satisfied with some simple explanation of my admiration for Smith and his work despite some quite foundational differences, which by largely ignoring them I have perhaps tacitly denied. I have always felt that Smith’s work informs and inspires my own development, even if I had yet to attempt to understand quite how. It is perhaps common to simply have these feelings without ever doing anything to come to a deeper appreciation of the differences. Yet there are those moments when something abducts (in the Peircean sense of this term) one to act. Such a moment for me occurred while reading Smith’s statement on experience in his 2010 AAR lecture “Reading Religion,” finally published in 2018. He said this:

I intend the conjunction [that is, of the two words of his title “Reading Religion”] to distance myself from other possibilities, most particularly that advocated by Jung and by some of our colleagues: experiencing religion. My scruples are, perhaps, overly developed in this regard. I’ve been long fond of the work of John Capgrave, Provincial of the British Mendicant Order of the Austin Friars centered at Lyn. In his official capacity, he journeyed to

²¹ For those who did not know Jonathan, he was openly hostile, yet with a strong sense of humor, to most things technological like computers, internet, mobile phones, even typewriters (although on rare occasions he did type).

Rome in 1450 and wrote an account of sites seen, “The Solace of Pilgrims.” It opens with the twofold claim of veracity: “I shall not write but that I find in authors or else that I see with eye.” Throughout my career, it has been my bias to affirm the first, the authors, and to utterly dismiss the second: with mine own eye.²²

Through the years, my chief mode of travel has been to go to the library or to my bookshelves. Although I’ve written a good bit about place, I’ve never had the slightest desire to see for myself the places I’ve described. I’ve relied, rather, on published sources, photographs, sketches, verbal descriptions, maps, diagrams. Once, with Elaine [Smith’s wife], by accident, I found myself before an unknown, rather confusing building in the old city of Jerusalem. When told that it was, in fact, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, a site to which I had devoted a chapter of a book, I went no further inside, remarking, “I prefer my church to theirs.” . . . I have consistently made a choice of the *map* over the *territory*. Although you may well disagree, it has been a self-limitation that, for me, yields cognitive gain. That is, reading, as a privileged mode of *mediated* rather than of *immediate* sight or experience.²³

Reading this passage, even though I had heard him make similar statements many times before, I found myself stirred, perhaps by the starkness of Smith’s statement, and by its style, by its incongruity with my own inclinations. How could I find so important one who seemingly rejects sensory experience altogether, save, by default only, the experience of reading and viewing maps and photographs, with whom self-movement was limited

²² I can’t help but notice that, as I’ve developed in some length elsewhere (see chapter 2, “The Necessary Double-Face: Jonathan Z. Smith and Comparison”), Smith’s love of joke and riddle are evidenced here. First of all, I have to notice how remarkable it is that in a plenary lecture to the American Academy of Religion Smith would make such a specific reference to something so strangely exotic as Capgrave. But then it seems to me it is Smith’s own brand of humor, developed and displayed in his studies of Frazer a half century earlier, to make the rather widely accepted point that veracity is considered to be based on sources, what is read, and on observation, what is seen. Yet Smith, who claims a fondness for Capgrave making this point, rejects the latter, the veracity of observation. So a jest for sure, but then also a riddle. How is it that Smith can reject the veracity of what is seen yet accept the truth of what is read given that what is read is most often a description of what the author being read has seen? It is not that Smith rejects all evidence of the other or, more radically, of a “world of other men,” for he will, in the next paragraph, indicate that he has “relied, rather, on published sources, photographs, sketches, verbal descriptions, maps, diagrams.” I’d describe Smith’s style as play.

²³ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 121. And, I express my gratitude to Braun and McCutcheon for making these important and insightful materials available. This lecture, delivered October 31, 2010, is also available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/K8ZuJ3BdHFk>.

to walking to the library and his bookshelves? Reading Smith's statement finally awakened me to the importance of addressing the role of experience in both his work and my own. Experiencing this incongruity gave rise to thought. I at first felt motivated by an eagerness to reconcile stark differences or at least to come to understand why, even with a seeming fundamental difference, I have always found Smith abidingly important and of unquestioned value; we seek, perhaps too eagerly, sameness, similarity. Yet, most importantly and patiently, if uncomfortably, by appreciating difference and incongruity, we might come to understand experience, especially the experience of incongruity, as fundamental to a proper academic study of religion. Despite such seemingly antiexperience (at least experience-limiting) statements, I believe Smith remains an important guide and inspiration even on the critical matter of the role of experience in the study of religion.

I quoted at some length Smith's comments on experience because they engage a number of important concerns. What is initially important is that Smith is focused on the experience of the scholar of religion rather than, or at least as much as, on the subjects of his religion study. While it is often implied, I think it rather rare that the experiential aspect of an academic's methods is considered at all. Certainly, there is occasional consideration of fieldwork and participant observation, and perhaps a bit in the rare discussions of pedagogy,²⁴ yet even these discussions usually do not consider the scholar's own (personal) experience and how it shapes her or his studies. Smith's focus on the experiential aspect of the scholar is important in its contribution to a proper academic study. Smith seems to take a very conservative position; academic experience largely comprises the movement-limited experiences related to reading. In this respect Smith follows the armchair work of Frazer; we might say that his early studies of Frazer gesturally naturalized his preferred mode of study, of experience.

Smith refers, in the statement quoted, to at least two understandings of experience without explicitly distinguishing them. He first identifies experience with Carl Jung (1875–1961). Doubtless Smith is referring to Jung's efforts to generate "extraordinary" experiences through "active imagination," a technique that some consider akin to an artist's efforts at stimulating inspiration, while others consider that it generates a mystical or "religious" experience. Jung described these experiences and they became objects of his

²⁴ It is notable that Smith's interests in pedagogy were extensive. He was not only a popular and noted teacher, he was for a number of years also dean of the College at the University of Chicago. His publications on teaching have been compiled by Christopher I. Lehrich in *On Teaching Religion*.

further reflection, insights into his unconsciousness, in his partially autobiographical, posthumously published, book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1962). Smith refers to this technique as “experiencing religion” and by doing so he invokes the common identity of religion with the spiritual or mystical, the internal or seeming debodied (is this possible? perhaps debodding?) experience. He also acknowledges this approach as an academic method in which the scholar constructs his or her own experience as the means by which to understand the scholar’s subject/object of study. He rejects this approach while acknowledging that others do not.

Smith describes his outrage at Jung’s insistence that “no one can really understand things unless he has experienced them himself. . . . for lack of experience, [they] must necessarily remain an empty web of words.” Smith reports that upon copying this passage he scrawled across it the word “nonsense.”²⁵ And, of course, it is.²⁶ A distinctive marker of experience is that it doesn’t exist in the abstract, floating about debodied and apart from ownership.

The rejection of this kind of experience affirms the importance of distinguishing religious or religious-like methods of exploring religion from properly (secular) academic methods. It is clear that a major contribution of Smith is to reject engaging the sacred or the spiritual as a component of a proper method. Interestingly, these methods are extrasensory or assume some extraordinary religious sense; thus there is accuracy, if perhaps also irony, in Smith’s scrawled word “nonsense,” that is, without sense in either sense of the word.

Smith’s second reference to experience is that of being “in the presence of” (“*immediate* sight or experience”) his subject/object of study; that is, to have a direct body-based sensory encounter with what one studies. This sort of experience usually emphasizes that all the senses are actively available. Of course, no experience is possible without sensory involvement,²⁷ so even mediated experience involves the senses if, perhaps, it is not so highly engaged or so directly in contact with the actual subjects of our interest. Without ambiguity Smith indicates his preference is reading the books and so-called

²⁵ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 120. The Jung citation is in note 13.

²⁶ Yet Smith was certainly no fan of empathy as an academic method.

²⁷ I suppose some will want to hold that internal thought (internal dialogue) and awareness (the simple body-stationary experience of “I am”) are not sensory, at least in the usual terms of involving the traditional senses. Yet this was the classic philosophical problem of the “flying man” addressed centuries ago by Condillac. His conclusion was that awareness minimally required a sense of touch. Soon thereafter Maine de Biran indicated that self-movement was essential to self-awareness. See Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 219–36.

secondary resources that are available in one's library. It is notable that in this respect, Smith aligns with James George Frazer, whose *The Golden Bough* was the subject of Smith's Yale doctoral dissertation. He does not seem even interested in an "in the presence of" sensory bodily experience as a complement to these print maps of the territory lived by "other men." Interestingly, Smith makes the rather odd indication of a preference for reading as "a privileged mode of *mediated*" experience. Although reading is primarily an experience (sensory-active) of the eye (sight most closely connected in Western contexts with the intellect), Smith rejects what he describes as engaging his subject "with mine own eye."

The final sentence of Smith's classic essay "Map Is Not Territory" is, "Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess."²⁸ I'll return to consider this example more fully. The strong preference for reading, for *mediated* experience, for maps, is an important distinction for an academic study; it surely describes what has been most normal. Smith rejected the Jungian-style approach of messing about generating spiritual-like experiences through experiments in "active imagination" because doing so confounds the religious, or spiritual, with the properly secular academic studies of religion. Yet there remains Smith's aversion to go banging about other cultures making direct observations with one's own eyes, and other senses as well, we might suppose. In a quite practical sense, if one limits one's study to "reading," does doing so not raise the question of what is the actual subject of study? Is it the real worlds of "other men," or is it the writings of observers and other scholars? Is there a difference? How does a method limited to "reading" account for the difference?²⁹ There is, of course, the matter of the origination of and ontological grounding of what is written, what is being mediated through the words. Is the subject independent of what is read of interest or of importance to a proper academic study? Further, is there no role at all for the extra-academic life experience of the scholar to the proper study of religion (I'm obviously thinking of my decades of dancing that were not directly involved in an academic study)? Is it even possible to strictly limit a proper academic study of real other people and cultures to our "reading" them? If

²⁸ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 309.

²⁹ This concern parallels the distinction between the ethnographic and the encyclopedic modes of comparison and also scholarship. The ethnographer is the one in the presence of, yet transduces this personal experience of observation into text, document, chart, graph, and map. The encyclopedist reads and renders significant the materials, that is, *things*, prepared by the ethnographer. What is left out of this division of academic labor especially by the reader of the subject is the processes of transduction performed by "in the presence of" observers. I'll deal with transduction later.

“reading” amounts to a “mediated” experience, can one simply ignore what and how the objects of mediation—books, maps, diagrams—come into existence and if they are actually connected with any real other? The personal experience and understanding of what is read is inarguably shaped by each reader’s personal experience. Concepts are not only corporeal, they are shaped and held by actual specific historically, culturally, and psychologically identifiable bodies.³⁰ Riddles. And beyond these two types, experience is still much more complex and interesting.

Experience and the Study of Religion

The term “experience” is richly complex and in my view, as should be abundantly clear, refers to primary and essential aspects of all academic studies, as also to life. Yet it is important to describe and reflect on the ways the term is used, its various modes, each relevant in some ways to developing a proper academic study of religion. While the distinctions made to this point include “scholar-constructed experience” and “in the presence of” experience, there are other more fundamental uses of the term as it appears in common speech. I’ll introduce these distinctions and then return to more careful and extensively critical discussions of the importance of these various aspects of experience for a proper academic study of religion.

A common use of the term “experience” is simply a reference to the awareness of an encounter; the experience of time, of sleep, of conversation, of reading, and so on. Etymologically, the term comes from the late fourteenth century, indicating “observation as the source of knowledge; actual observation; an event which has affected one,” from Old French *esperience*, “experiment, proof, experience.” Experience, in this usage, indicates something akin to the second example drawn from the Smith quotation; he wrote, “I found myself before an unknown, rather confusing building.” It means an awareness of being in the presence of something or an awareness of being engaged by something. It implicates a presence both in time and in space. Experience in this sense includes a “feeling of nowness” an aspect of “in the presence of.”

³⁰ I think particularly of Marcel Mauss’s “Techniques of Body” and even Michael Polanyi’s view that even in the history of science all knowledge is personal, in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

Yet experience also implicates encounter and perhaps even affect related to encounter.

While experience may indicate the most banal of awareness, “I’m experiencing,” it is also commonly used to refer to the unusual; indeed, it often marks the unusual itself. “I’ve never done anything like that before; what an experience!” This use of experience focuses on the affect, on the impact of encounter. In the study of religion such extraordinary implications are routinely (and I think inappropriately) assumed in the use of the term “religious experience.” Smith’s reference to Jung suggests this connection of experience with the extraordinary, the spiritual, the mystical. There is a long lineage of the identity of “religious experience” with the special or extraordinary.³¹ Ann Taves’s book *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (2009) makes this identity between “religious experience” and something “special”; indeed, her understanding of religious experience is limited to the special, as is her understanding of religion as a “special thing.” The “special” that marks this use the term “religious experience” tends toward an implication of the unique. Unique, as discussed in chapter 2 on comparison, technically designates the incomparable, a set of one, and thus simply excludes academic or comparative studies.

The term “experience” is also used to refer to the *accumulation* of the effect of immediate sensory bodied engagement, of the repeated iteration of the doings of something, of even the ongoingness of the processes of living. It is not simply the accumulation of discrete instances of doing or being in the presence of the same thing over and over—like adding beans to a jar—but rather the implication of this use of experience is a growing and compounding that occurs, without necessarily the full awareness of the ongoing processes, through repetition and iteration. We speak of our experience doing a certain job for an extended period of time, our experience with friendships or amorous relationships, our experience playing music or sports, our teaching experience, our experience with living for seven decades. There is an affinity of this understanding of experience with both memory and wisdom, also with acumen, with skill. In the academic environment it used to be customary to refer to one’s PhD studies as “training.” I’m not so sure this is still common. I used to dislike this reference since it seemed to indicate a limiting and enforced focusing and restriction of the acceptable use of techniques and

³¹ From Friedrich Schleiermacher through William James to Ann Taves.

theories. It seemed to me to discourage creativity and innovation. I've now reconsidered the term and see it more positively in realizing that training also means the accumulation of skill and experience. It also is often relevant to our human religious subjects. The wisdom of elders and those with authority often correlates with their accumulation of experience through the long repetition of ritual, practice, and applications or just plain living.

In my recent work, I have focused on gesture and posture as methods of comprehending the ongoing cumulative processes that we may refer to as experience. Religious experience, considered in these terms, is almost the direct opposite of how the term has so commonly been used to indicate the exceptional, the special. Experience, as banal awareness, is our sense of presence, our aliveness. It is our constant presence of ourselves in the world, special to be sure in a basic biological sense, but not special among the flow of this ongoing experience. In the sense of experience as cumulative, rather than limited to the special or rare occurrence, experience is based on the banal and quotidian gestural practice, upon extensive repetition. With this quick overview I return to explore in fuller depth various implications of experience, especially as relevant to the development of a proper academic study of religion.

There is a range of concerns raised by considering experience as an aspect of a method for the proper academic study of religion. The *religious* lineage in which the study of religion emerged mid-twentieth century held the ineffable or the Wholly Other to be the predominant and definitive marker of religion. Thus, for a scholar of religion to employ methods—religious participation, Jungian, or otherwise—that produce extraordinary experiences in themselves, something akin to mystical experience, would seem important, perhaps even essential, to the study of religion at that time. To engage in extraordinary, or mystical, experiences and then to reflect on them might then be proposed as an authentic academic method, and the recipient of such experiences is then *de facto* an authority, even a religious authority; the argument was that for the scholar to experience something seemingly akin to what is “religious experience,” understood in these terms, surely enhances the potential for insight and understanding.³²

³² A personal example. Some years ago, I attended what I thought was to be a lecture by a friend of mine whom I had known since we were both students at the University of Chicago. I hadn't seen him in quite some time. The location was a large room packed with folks who seemed to be eagerly awaiting the lecture. Fifteen minutes or more past the start time, the crowd hushed as they heard the sound of a drum. My friend, much to my great surprise, entered from the back dressed in white robes, carrying a flat drum that he proceeded to beat as he walked slowly around the room. Eventually he

My immediate inclination is, as I have developed elsewhere,³³ to make a strong distinction between a *religious* study of religion and a *properly academic* study of religion. Based on this distinction, I would suggest that these methods of engaging an experience that is felt akin to a *religious* experience are flawed as properly academic in several respects: some are merely concocted by the scholar; the object of such a religious-like study is a vague mixture of the memory of experience and its description, thus a confusion between the data to be studied and the method of study; and such an approach reflects an inappropriate restriction to the extraordinary of what is considered as religious experience with the accompanying overly narrow (and religiously founded) understanding of religion. For the most part I think these are important and legitimate concerns. Yet I have to ask how my several decades of dancing and self-moving are any different from this Jungian-style method. I strongly believe that my own dancing has provided me much insight into the dancing, even the religious dancing, of so many others. In Smith's strong example, apart from my own dancing and my personal witness of the dancing of others, what would be the basis for what I might indicate as "I prefer my dancing to theirs"? I can't even imagine such a position to be possible.

Would a video of the dance of others be the basis for my not experiencing dancing in my own body, either as dancer or observer? While I have used films of dancing to teach about the dances of others to my students, I have taught courses on dance films. While there is a sense of film being of the objective eye—largely based on the misleading notion, sometimes considered a film theory, that the lens sees what it sees on its own, objectively³⁴—we all know this not to be accurate. Despite it often appearing as a completely transparent window onto the life and culture of others, film is always shaped by

arrived at the center of the space and sat cross-legged on a raised platform. His talk included a bunch of romanticized and unfounded baloney about Australian Aborigines—I'd just written a book on their cultures—and he proclaimed that their ancient wisdom has been ignored, unfortunately, by the modern West. On and on. Yet what shocked me even more was the near worship of this man, as evidenced by the comments made following the presentation. It seemed to me the authority claimed by this presentation was not based on any academic argument, but rather on the seeming authority of specialness; the garb, the drumming, the cross-legged sitting, the tone of voice, and style of presentation proclaimed "specialness" and thus authority and unquestioned wisdom.

³³ See chapter 3, "I Don't Want to Be a Mystic! On Self-Moving and Religious Experience," in my *Creative Encounters*.

³⁴ Especially realist film theory as developed especially by Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin. See J. Dudley Andrew, *Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 104–78.

the filmmaker and by the medium itself. It is limited principally to the visual as its dominant sense, although often supplemented by the aural, by sound. What is shown of the subject is strongly focused by the decisions of the filmmaker, by what she or he chooses to aim the camera at, by the preparation of the subjects, by the editing, and so much more.

The flamenco films of Carlos Saura offer insight into the way filmmakers shape not only the events viewed, but also, for a large population, their understanding of the subject of the film in the world beyond the medium.³⁵ In the era of film, which is much more recent than we often appreciate,³⁶ the visual understanding of entire dance traditions (and flamenco is a powerful example) is for most people in the world based almost exclusively on film. Saura's classic flamenco film *Sevillanas* (1992) shows images of dancers seemingly offstage preparing to dance. This is followed by a stage performance of a specific type of flamenco dance, including the identity of the specific flamenco dances appearing as a subtitle displayed in the early frames of each performance segment. The film uses the same technique to present a number of flamenco dance forms. This technique was commonly used by Saura. It reminds the viewer that "this is a staged flamenco performance," a demonstration rather than a cultural event, yet by showing the artists preparing and by labeling each dance, Saura's technique also signals a documentary style, thus designating his film as "authentic," as "objective." The distinction is emphasized by his staging, which is a pure, slick, shiny, sanitized, neutral-colored set, nothing to contextualize or distract from the dancers and musicians. Unseen is the camera itself, which often moves about the dancers and musicians in perfect partnering, clearly carefully choreographed, to capture selected perspectives, perspectives never possible to an observer in a cultural or a stage performance although creating for the viewer an experience of being in the midst of the performance (dancing) rather than viewing it from afar, as through a proscenium arch, for example. This filmic technique conveys a purity, even an abstractness, to flamenco. Yet, of course, this is flamenco according to Saura's vision and construction, highly shaped by artistic filmic techniques and perspectives. The experience of watching a Saura film is one of almost unnoticeable gravity, the viewer being drawn into the dancing and music; the framing, so intentionally constructed by Saura

³⁵ See Marvin D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

³⁶ The advent and rapid development of YouTube beginning in 2005 has had a remarkable impact on the availability of dance films from cultures all over the world.

and never hidden by him, quickly fades as the performance captivates with intensity.

A different version of the same technique is also used by Saura to draw viewers into the dance drama while constantly reminding that us it is a staged filmic presentation. For example, Saura begins the film *El Amor Brujo* (1986) outside the soundstage, and the first “take” is a very long one, moving into the soundstage building (we hear a loud bang as we see the huge overhead door slam shut), traveling slowly through the backstage areas (filled with equipment and scaffolding), to enter a rather artificial set with actors (drawing the eye from the great heights of the warehouse soundstage to the set), to finally arriving at the action, the story, this one shot taking three minutes and forty seconds. The viewer is constantly reminded, “This is a film,” “This is artificial.” Yet this message only heightens the impact of immediacy by which we are engaged in the story.³⁷ And, indeed, the entire dynamics of the whole drama unfold in foreshadowing in short order; in the first few minutes we already know, in some sense, all that is to come. The foreknowledge serves only to intensify our experience.

So many flamenco films and public art performances present what might be called “salon flamenco,” a staged, slick, highly dramatic performance by young, slim dancers in flamenco-distinctive costume. These presentations are what seem iconic and authentic to most. I’ve been fascinated by a common response of many of my students when shown a film of Gypsy (Romani) flamenco dancers and musicians at a cultural event usually in someone’s kitchen or the patio of a modest home. Chubby little grandmas, young mothers, kids, older couples; they all perform. They rarely have flashy costumes, mostly just ordinary clothing. My students have sometimes told me, “That’s not *real* flamenco! I was in Spain and I saw the real thing.” Of course, all these films and stage performances are various presentations of flamenco, but none is simply objective or objectively authentic. All are products of creative encounters between filmmakers or performers and their subjects, mediated by a range of technologies. All tend to both report as well as construct their subjects.³⁸

³⁷ This film technique is similar to what, elsewhere, I have considered at some length under the term the *ultimate Turing test*. This test, which I developed by extending that designed by Alan Turing, to determine if an artificial intelligent being might be experienced as a sentient being even when the artificiality of the made being is a constant presence made clear by exposed wiring and plastic body parts. See my *Religion and Technology*, chapter 5, “Ava and the Ultimate Turing Test.”

³⁸ Flamenco, as with so many dances, has been embroiled in issues of authenticity. My friend René Heredia, a flamenco guitarist born to a Romani family in Spain who has spent his entire life with flamenco, has an interesting answer when asked, “What is authentic flamenco?” He responds, “It is what I do!” There is an extensive literature on this topic. See Michelle Hefner Hayes, *Flamenco: Conflicting Histories of the Dance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).

Each year René Heredia taught the flamenco studio for in my Religion and Dance class. René, born in Spain to a Gypsy family, has been a renowned flamenco guitarist for decades, including accompanying the celebrated Carmen Amaya (1913–1963). He played with Paco de Lucía (1947–2014) at a concert I attended. Meeting the one hundred students in my class in a huge gymnasium-sized studio, René brought several of the dancers from his Flamenco Fantasy Dance Theater company to help teach and perform. René typically talked a bit about flamenco history. He taught the students some beginning flamenco dance steps, never easy given the complexity of flamenco rhythms. They danced to his guitar accompaniment. He concluded with a brief performance, often including a guitar solo and some dancing, in full costume, by his dancers to his accompaniment. I prepared the students for the studio with several lectures, including films and music. Sometimes I brought in a flamenco guitarist to the classroom to perform and teach clapping rhythms (*palmas*). I described the notion of *duende*, a term indicating a quality of passion and inspiration, a heightened experience that sometimes occurs to dancers, musicians, and even the audience during flamenco performances. It is important to note that *duende* occurs in the midst of the repetitive mesmerizing absorbing rhythms shared among a group. While it is often described in spiritual terms, surely there could be nothing experienced as more fully bodied.

I'm pretty sure that most students found the thirty studios of this academic course powerful learning experiences. Moving their bodies in the attempt to do even the simplest elements (the difficulty and seeming impossibility was often prominent in students' experience) and being in the presence of teachers who had had a lifetime of experience (accumulative) amounted to a memorable and active learning experience (sensory present in the moment). Some might suggest that such pedagogy is but a way of entertaining students and a sure method of gaining high faculty ratings, that an hour of fumbling flamenco, for example, does not make for much understanding of flamenco. Both comments are accurate. It is also accurate to say that these students long remember this hour and have an enduring sense about flamenco. I think it also accurate to say that students gain something more and different in struggling through dancing a few flamenco steps than they do watching a Saura flamenco film. Shifting from pedagogy to academic method, we must also ask what value, if any, is the experience of an academic dancing his or her own dances or even (especially?) those of others, perhaps doing so for many

years, to the study of the dances of other people, particularly religiously valued dances?

Perhaps it might be possible to argue for this approach to understanding dancing by invoking the common notion that dancing is a universal language; thus to learn any dance is to learn the language of dance universally understood. While I certainly agree that dancing is a human form of action that seems to be widely, if not quite universally, engaging when encountered, I do not think it is a language universally understood.³⁹ I even think that to identify dance as a language tends to overwhelm what is most interesting about dancing with the analogy of its being somehow a natural language. This view reduces dancing to a primary function of communicating messages. In my experience, this identity is often in a romanticizing context. Dancing, being of body, is always culturally, historically, and personally specific, is always particular even if the biological body is in some sense universal. We may be moved or feel connected with the dances of other people, yet it can certainly be argued that only through long experience in a specific cultural setting does the fuller nuance and value of a specific dance become clear, or felt to be naturally interwoven with its rich context. Further, I argue that it is not appropriate to dance as a genre of action to be considered in the particular terms of language. While there is the academic presumption that anything can be transduced into words (or perhaps numbers), in my experience part of the power of dancing is that it is an alternative to words, highly resistant to such a transduction. The demands to determine meaning in terms of grammar and syntax and to translate every element of dance into natural language is, in my view, to miss the core distinction of dancing, and also its inherent force.

There are parallel common views of religion. The perennialist, or essentialist, view is that religions are, at some level, really all the same; that differences are apparent, not actual; that differences are of manifestation, not essence. This view is a common folk understanding, yet it is present in the academic context in approaches such as Mircea Eliade's academic theology. His patternist approach holds that there are common abstract principles expressible in patterns and that various cultures simply manifest the same principles differently. There is also the common, often tacit, embrace that religion is

³⁹ In my decades of teaching and being in the close environs of dancing I have encountered quite a few individuals who dislike dance in any sense, but especially actually dancing.

everywhere good.⁴⁰ Thus, if all religions are the same, then religious experience of any kind might be argued to establish expertise and authority.

What, if anything, are the goals and expectations regarding the experiences of a scholar related to her or his studies of others? Is there any significant difference, when articulating academic method, between Jung's quasi or real (who would know?) mystical experiences generated by practicing active imagination as a method for studying religions and training as a dancer to study the dancings of others, even their religious dancings?⁴¹ It seems to me the issue is complicated and can't be easily or simply resolved.

As intimated, my feeling is that generating some sort of pseudospiritual experience is something I'd not feel comfortable with as my own preferred academic method. The presumption, perhaps because of the expectations of the larger community, is that such experiences are (falsely?) authenticating of expertise and knowledge. When I studied Native American cultures, I avoided "doing a sweat" with any of my Native American friends and colleagues. I found that "sweats" occur in various Native American cultures for a range of purposes for widely ranging occasions. They are often associated with processes of receiving visions or gaining wisdom or being initiated. Yet they are also done on the most ordinary occasions and often as something that communities simply do as a way of being who they are. Most of the occasions for non-Native Americans to do sweats is a more generic setting and it is a popular activity for nonindigenous people to experience. While I know many who have experienced sweats and I do not disparage their experience at all, I never felt comfortable doing so myself. I may not fully understand my reluctance. I might say that it was because I wanted to keep my relationship with Native Americans free of any assumption that I was an authority or somehow an insider, or that I was seeking this status. Yet I know that participation is often a way toward acceptance and valued relationship. I'm not sure these are accurate; maybe I just couldn't take the heat.

⁴⁰ For comments see Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 183–86.

⁴¹ In my reading, a large portion of academic works by scholars who identify themselves as dance anthropologists begins with a credentialing narrative that emphasizes authority based on long dance experience of the scholar. And on the subject of experience, I've long been interested in the prefatory comments that so often introduce works of anthropology. So many of them are entry narratives that describe the anthropologists' travel to the location of their subject (distant and exotic), their early rejection by them, but then eventually their acceptance. It seems that experience "with mine own eye (and all the other senses as well)" "in the presence of" the subject is a commonly accepted criterion for academic authority.

Yet I have spent many a day and night experiencing as an observer Hopi kachina dances of many types and of many different kachinas. The sensory drenching of these experiences is invariably remarkable. And I cannot imagine ever feeling that it is possible to comprehend Hopi kachina dancing and singing without this experience. Yet, on the other hand, I've written of (and not without confidence) many ritual events, dances, and musics that I have not personally experienced or been in the presence of. What is adequate and appropriate and relevant experience to an academic? In the case of the Hopi, is it one kachina event? A year's events? What of the secret dances in the kivas?⁴² What of the women's dances (if you are a man)? Perhaps, as was the advice of Frazer and Smith, we should leave the "in the presence of" experiencing to professionals, trained ethnographers; perhaps our task should be just to read books and look at pictures. Yet how impoverishing this strategy would be.

The word "heuristic" indicates the enabling of people to discover something for themselves. The common implication is that this enabling is subjective and hands-on, the implication being through experience. The term "heuristic" comes from Greek *heuretikos*, meaning inventive, also *heurema*, indicating an invention, a discovery, that which is found unexpectedly. The sense of unexpectedness, or surprise—or Smith's words "difference" and "incongruity"—indicates the subjective aspect of discovery or invention.⁴³ Heuristics seem grounded in the biology of thumbs and hands, the evolutionary human distinctions that lead to the concept "to grasp," in its implications of hands-on learning. The suggestion I make here is that the often banal and repetitive self-moving bodied experiences of the academic, be they reading or dancing, do not so much create an academic authority as they make an academic capable of being surprised, creative, inventive.

⁴² I think, for example, of the nearly fifteen hundred pages of published journals of Alexander M. Stephen, who spent years near the end of the nineteenth century sitting in Hopi kivas at Walpi writing down everything he observed. Elsie Clews Parsons finally edited his journals for publication. See Alexander M. Stephen, *Hopi Journal of A. M. Stephen, Parts I and II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

⁴³ For a full account of the role of surprise in discovery see my "To Risk Meaning Nothing: Charles Sanders Peirce and the Logic of Discovery," in my *Creative Encounters*, 197–226.

Transduction

I've grown quite attached to the word "transduction."⁴⁴ The implications of my use of the term are its reference to the transformation of something from one form, place, or concept to another. I like to think of it in even stronger terms: the transformation of something from one mode of reality to another. I used to do a classroom exercise in which I'd divide the students into two groups. Each group would select a couple students to perform a short activity of their own invention in which they did not speak; they also wore blank white masks. The students in the observing group were to write down what they experienced and observed. The groups were not allowed to see the performances of the other group. I purposefully did not give directions on how to observe or what to write. After both groups had done this exercise they exchanged the writings and were tasked to replicate based only on the written materials what the other group had performed. Then, of course, together we all discussed the challenges of being an objective ethnographer.

Among of the greatest challenges is to transduce the richly sensory, highly complex movement, song, dance activities of a group of people involving also costuming, food, and ritual actions, including remarkably complex collections of material objects, and on and on. Even to record or document what one observes for two minutes in a classroom environment seemed to most students almost overwhelming. Although it is quite clear that language has remarkable powers of description, it is incontestable that to write an objective description of a long, complex sensory- and movement-rich cultural event amounts to transduction of an order on par with alchemy. The "in the presence of" senses of touch, taste, hearing, and smell are completely absent in writing, and the sense of sight transduces a panorama of often many simultaneous moving images into a fixed string of alphabetic characters.

As for the reading of ethnographic accounts, surely Jonathan Smith's consideration of Frazer and Eliade shows (and I'd add my own considerations of Smith and Eliade; see chapter 4, "Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion") that the academic reading and interpretation of ethnographic texts are ones of transduction as well. Again, it seems to me uncontested that the reader's personal life experience must heavily influence the way this arc of

⁴⁴ For a fuller discussion of transduction and how it is important to a proper academic study of religion see chapter 5, "Smith's Golden Bough: Moving toward a Proper Academic Study of Religion."

transduction takes place. Stark objective description must be complemented with poetry, for beginnings.

What was remarkable, amazing really, is that when my students were asked to use the collection of various “ethnographies” from another group of students to recreate the performances they had not observed, they often were able to do so much more successfully than any of us would have expected. There is something seemingly inexplicable, something akin to alchemy, in ethnography and our readings of it. I cannot help but lean toward some common biological foundation as a leading hypothesis to explore; yet I’m also pretty much okay with allowing that the human powers of transduction are remarkable, if not wholly comprehensible.

One other note, somewhat limited, on transduction is necessary, and this is so because I believe we have failed to take seriously enough description as a technique we cannot avoid. Ethnographers and anthropologists have given this much attention. I suppose a limitation for religion students is the purposeful exclusion of most ethnography with the preference for religious texts, where it is assumed that God or the founders are the ethnographers (or better authors). Religion students speak of interpretation and translation rather than transduction. I think that interpretation and translation suggest that everything is *in* the text. This process is similar to those tiny little objects, sponges I think, that when put in water swell up into something quite large. Interpretation is like putting the text in water (or context or academic theory) to release and reveal what is there, but squished or hidden. Transduction I believe is different in that it is a transformation of one kind of reality to another. It is not a matter of it all being there needing release; it is that most of one reality is not there because there has been a shift to a wholly different reality, or mode/medium of reality. The movement between different realities that correlates with different media is something I believe we are a long way from engaging, or even acknowledging, as we do the serious work to establish a proper study of religion.

Some might suggest that we should leave the experience to the people themselves, should they choose to write about or paint or otherwise present the events of their culture.⁴⁵ Focusing on my studies of Native Americans and Africans, there are a few obvious classics—Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks* (Lakota), Talayesva’s *Sun Chief* (Hopi), Waters’s *Book of the Hopi*, Griaule’s

⁴⁵ In my studies of Native Americans, I think of Fred Kabotie (Hopi) and Arthur Amiotte (Lakota), who painted aspects of their culture.

Conversations with Ogotemmel (Dogon), to mention several that I'm closely familiar with—yet, while I believe all these are valuable writings (I enjoyed reading them all and learned much from each), they offer very particular and limited views of these cultures.⁴⁶ Perhaps most importantly, few readers have any idea (or are even concerned) that none of these are somehow “representative” or constitute some pervasive timeless authoritative insider's objective account of a religious culture; yet these works are often read with these assumptions by the folk and even by scholars. These are all creative encounters that have fascinating stories about how they came into existence.

In more general terms, might we ask what value is hearing music in a study of music? Does the experience of our ears add anything to our study of music? Such a question seems odd, doesn't it? As an alternative, might we not just read the musical score? And what is the authentic piece of music, its score or a live performance (and whose performance?)? And if musical notation is preferred to hearing the music “with mine own ear,” then why not dance notation, say Labanotation, as preferable to watching/hearing/experiencing dancing “with mine own body”? As a proper academic concerned with Javanese dancing, should I prefer my *bedoyo* (my writings about the dance based on reading Labanotation or maybe seeing a film) to the Javanese *bedoyo* danced in the sultan's palace in Jogjakarta?

While even entertaining such a preference seems ludicrous, in his *Fifth Hammer: Pythagoras and the Disharmony of the World* (2011), Daniel Heller-Roazen offers a remarkable example that might provide a formidable explanation. According to contemporary sixth century B.C. sources, apparently Pythagoras was drawn into a forge, a smithy, by the sound of five hammers rhythmically and melodically hammering. Based on the experience of his own ears he was inspired to develop a theory of harmony. He built various devices to experiment with the harmonic relationship among various tones and to describe them in terms of relationships between integers, whole numbers. Pythagoras presupposed a relationship between harmonic principles in sound and harmonic principles in the universe based on the proposition that God's creation bears evidence of his perfection. How could God, in his perfection, create a world as anything other than a manifestation of his perfection? The trouble Pythagoras experienced—and remember that experience is etymologically based on experiment—is that he couldn't manage to

⁴⁶ I select these examples because I have personally been to these cultures and am familiar with the processes by which these books were written.

include the fifth hammer (and the sound it produced) in his theory of harmony while maintaining in mathematical terms the principle of perfection. Consequently, Pythagoras ignored the experience of his own ears, the very experience that inspired his efforts to create a theory of harmony, based on his belief in God's perfection as rendered by relationships among whole numbers. Of course, the famous theory of geometry that bears his name also refuted this belief because it required the inclusion (invention?) of the irrational number the square root of 2. Still, commitment to belief in principle or theology, as it were, has commonly been the basis for rejecting human experience, the felt evidence of the senses, the evidence of "mine own ear."⁴⁷

It seems evident that the common identification of religious experience with the special and the spiritual or mystical is based on theological or religious belief rather than on the obvious view of a proper academic study of religion. A simple inventory of everything that might be even loosely designated as religion would include countless quotidian banal actions and behaviors; an overwhelming portion would be described as highly repetitious, iterative, elements of practice, aspects of the most ordinary moments of life. A simple telling question is, how many among all the people in the world we consider to be religious have ever had a single special or mystical experience?⁴⁸ How many would even seek such an experience? Do not the individuals in this majority of all religious people have experiences, even important life-changing ones, related to and identified with their daily religious lives? Does not the identification of religious experience with these special types of experience clearly ignore or totally eliminate almost all experience of those we consider religious? Does not this limitation presume an understanding of religion that makes a proper study irrationally limited, rather marginal, and perhaps even impossible?

Experience as Surprisingly Fundamental to Smith

Jonathan Smith engaged the question of how the data that might be considered religion should be shaped—remembering, of course, that he strongly

⁴⁷ For fuller comment on Pythagoras see chapter 22, "Secret Hidden Horror," and chapter 23, "Step Again into the Forge," in my *Religion and Technology*.

⁴⁸ For a fuller discussion of these issues see my chapter 22, "Secret Hidden Horror," and chapter 23, "Step Again into the Forge," in *Religion and Technology*, and chapter 3, "I Don't Want to Be Mystic: On Self-Moving and Religious Experience," in *Creative Encounters*.

held there are no ontologically classified religious data, that religion is not a category of nature. Should religion be limited to these special and unusual moments, indescribable and so difficult to study? Or should religion be what happens every day in the most common and banal sense? Smith was clear he preferred the latter.

We have not been attendant to the ordinary, recognizable features of religion as negotiation and application but have rather perceived it to be an extraordinary, exotic category of experience that escapes everyday modes of thought. But human life—or, perhaps more pointedly, humane life—is not a series of burning bushes.⁴⁹

I don't know how many times I've reread and studied Smith's May 1974 inaugural lecture as William Benton Professor of Religion and the Human Sciences in the college, of which he would later serve as dean, at the University of Chicago. The last two pages have never ceased to fascinate and engage my repeated contemplation. This lecture was published as the final chapter in a 1978 collection of essays *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*. Like Smith's early studies of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, I continue to believe this early essay to be foundational to Smith's work, especially insightful in establishing the basis and criteria for a proper academic study of religion.

Like his essay "When the Bough Breaks,"⁵⁰ this lecture/essay bears a similarly provocative title—a riddle perhaps? And like the "Bough Breaks" essay, it is the final paragraphs that directly engage the provocation of riddle and jest. In the closing sentences of the lecture, Smith acknowledges Alfred Korzybski as the source of his title, "Map Is Not Territory," yet he then adds, invoking something of the jest and riddle we might expect, "but maps are all we possess."⁵¹ This sentence concludes a paragraph addressed explicitly to religion scholars. It is a summary of his discourse on the way that maps might be drawn by scholars to engage the study of "the worlds of other men," presumably the worlds of the real, living, religious people across history and the globe. It seems to proclaim Smith's elected limitation of the study of religion to "reading religion," as argued in his lecture thirty-six years later. It seems he holds that religion scholars read about the religions of other men; they don't engage them in their real territories. The religion scholar prefers—or is

⁴⁹ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 308.

⁵⁰ For an exploration of this title see chapter 1, "The Necessary Double-Face."

⁵¹ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 309.

it a limitation by default (and necessity?)—the virtual voyages on maps only rather than those of actual territories. Such a position leaves open how and who constructs these maps. It ignores the real existence of independent territories. It overlooks the interrelationship between these domains of reality and the operations of transduction necessary to there even being maps. It fails to engage the implication that limiting the academic enterprise to the maps can ever be anything other than the activities of a self-absorbed elitist cohort isolated from its subjects who find value only within the confines of their tiny artificial worlds. And in a perhaps sobering moment, as scholars, we must ask how many of us ever encounter anything of our subjects other than in the books we read, the maps without territories we experience. Most of those scholars who respond that they have regular encounters are referring to their subject of study being their own religiousness, their own religious communities; the academic study of religion remains largely a *religious* study of religion, a study of one's own religion. Should we actually be interested in the real worlds of other folks, how can our streams of little black markings on white surfaces held in the hands of our sitting, stationary bodies offer more than the barest hints of our subjects, whose self-moving bodies are sensorily drenched in life-and-death activities?

Alfred Korzybski (1879–1950) was an early twentieth-century developer of a field he termed *general semantics*. The maxim Smith quotes is drawn from Korzybski's fuller statement, "A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness."⁵² What is fascinating to me is that it appears that Smith's insistence that all we have are maps eliminates (or perhaps sidesteps) the remarkably fascinating and seemingly essential discourse—the relationship of map to any real territory—that seems implicated by the distinction between religion, a scholar's invention, and religions in the scholar's designation of them in the real sensory worlds of our subjects. In terms of his seminal Frazer work, we can recognize that Smith can support his statement that "maps are all we possess" because his attention was confined largely to *reading* Frazer against *reading* Frazer's sources (all of them documents); comparison was one map to another with no concern for the real world of the territories to which either of these maps ultimately, we might suppose, referred. In my study of Eliade's Numbakulla and the sacred pole Australian Aboriginal example, as shown in

⁵² Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (New York: Institute of General Semantics, [1933] 1994).

the chapter “Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion,” I make the effort to search exhaustively to the limitation of the available materials to bridge the transduction from living people to ethnographic accounts to scholarly citation. What I found was that the closer I got to some real human source, the further I was from documenting the example with which I began. In a sense it was maps all the way down. Korzybski was, however, interested in the map-territory relationship; indeed, one must recognize the importance of the implications of Korzybski’s fuller statement that the only usefulness of maps is in their similarity to territory. Given this larger discussion, it is hard not to see a parallel of Smith’s discussion of maps with his own conclusions about Frazer’s *Bough*. Smith wrote of Frazer, “There are no answers, because there are no questions”; surely, we must then say that “there are no maps, because there are no territories.” *All* is the scholar’s invention, maps without territories (yet how can that be?). And like Frazer, Smith’s statement, read in context, presents riddle (or perhaps jest) rather than rule or law.

Smith makes his comment that all we have are maps at the conclusion of a discussion of his analysis of the ways—classes or map types—myth and ritual might function in the cultures of “other men.” He explicitly denies that the three maps he articulates should be used as a classification of religions or cultures, although I think that at least two of these maps have often been used precisely this way. Yet we can’t simply leave his concern at this point. The riddle—an impossible copresence—is powerful.

Importantly, these maps (and I’ll engage these more fully shortly), Smith notes, “correspond to man’s *experience* of the world.”⁵³ That is, these are maps of the experience of “other men.” In this important statement, Smith foregrounds experience, the experience of others, as the subject for the study of religion. In an affirmation of the importance of being “in the presence of” the other (human presence, not theological presence), Smith suggests that we scholars “may have to become initiated by the other whom we study and undergo *the ordeal of incongruity*.”⁵⁴ This creative encounter is what I’ve held to be central to a recent set of essays overviewing some aspects of my own academic career, *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Difference* (2019). What we may learn from these creative encounters, these initiations by the “ordeal of incongruity,” is, in my view, among the most important of Smith’s insights. He writes, “We may have to relax some of our cherished notions of significance

⁵³ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309 (my emphasis).

⁵⁴ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309 (my emphasis).

and seriousness.”⁵⁵ I understand Smith to be questioning the wisdom and value of the common academic pursuit of meaning and explanation. Above all, what an “ordeal of incongruity” initiates for a scholar is a foregrounding of experience, a statement of the primacy of experience, essential even to anything being recognized as incongruous, for that matter. Incongruity is described as “ordeal,” a painful or unpleasant, protracted experience, not as an ontological phenomenon or a condition determined by reason and principle alone; ordeal is a feeling inseparable from the context of encounter. What I recognize as Smith’s insight is that the experience of incongruity is foundational both to those “other men” whose experiences we classify in various patterns and to scholars whose most humane work proceeds from their ongoing “ordeal of incongruity.” Religion scholarship, like the human subject of the scholarship, is an affair of the continuing “ordeal” of the double-face coherence/incoherence (tragedy/comedy in another context, in other terms) rather than the halting faux conclusiveness of meaning and explanation. We may limit our access only to maps. Given that our subjects may be in the past or afar, this may indeed be all the access we have. Otherwise, surely this strategy is a partial and temporary one designed mostly to protect us from the full force of this ordeal of incongruity. We may acknowledge that maps are all we have; and this may be a statement of necessity, or philosophy, or style. Yet we must acknowledge that without these maps somehow engaging the real sensual world of the experience of “other men” (even if all we have are writings about them), we accomplish nothing more than a schoolboy’s or schoolgirl’s exercise. A proper academic study of religion must strive for a greater contribution than that of self-reference or homework.

Smith intentionally abducts his readers in the initiatory experiential ordeal of incongruity in the final sentences of the lecture. “We [scholars] have often missed what is humane in the other by the very seriousness of our quest. We need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: ‘Map is not territory’—but maps are all we possess.”⁵⁶ The necessary incongruity! Seemingly consistent, as I’ve noted, with his 2010 AAR lecture “Reading Religion,” Smith here appears to hold that reading about the worlds of other men is the welcomed domain of his (of all?) academic work. Perhaps this embrace

⁵⁵ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

⁵⁶ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

of “only maps” is what, for Smith, distinguishes the academic from the non-academic. Yet the riddle remains. How can there be even the idea of map or activity of mapping without some posited (indeed, I should think, real) territory? Is Smith setting clear limitations to what is properly academic? Is Smith positing that “the worlds of other men” is some hyperreality, some postmodern image construct, without anything real external to our own imaginings? Is Smith noting something of the obvious lesson that no method or technique—no mapping—can result in the total (or even adequate) grasp of the other? His indication of “the necessary incongruity” leans toward this final option. It seems Smith holds that being “relentlessly self-conscious” is not something that has an ending; there is in the very notion of map the necessary incongruity—map is never territory, map must chart territory—that is the very character of the creative encounters we call scholarship. The necessary academic suffering of the ordeal of incongruity is, if nothing else, the profound realization of the enormous difficulty, if not total impossibility, of the task we have elected to undertake. It may be noble, but it is also absurd. Indeed, the crucial shift is from practicing academia as bent on achieving an attainable goal to one of an ongoing endless, perhaps fumbling yet humane, inquiry, itself a way of life, a way in which the ordeal of incongruity amounts to the surprise that produces hypotheses, the exciting promise that engages pursuit.

Incongruity is a feeling kind of knowing. Relative to the core concern of this chapter, the subject of Smith’s discussion of mapping and the affect he seems to intentionally initiate in his readers both foreground experience and hold it to be primary. Riddle, jest, incongruity, religion, and scholarship are inseparable from feeling kinds of knowing, from what we must understand in increasingly rich terms as experience. While Smith makes a seemingly strong distinction between the scholar and the “worlds of other men,” he does not distinguish among them in terms of the dynamics of their being humane or the dynamics of what constitutes their humanity; and that is the constant play of “the necessary incongruity,” what elsewhere Smith refers to as “the necessary double-face” and what I have referred to, among other terms, as an “impossible copresence” and an “aesthetic of impossibles.”

Returning to Smith’s articulation of maps, while Smith allows that “other maps will be drawn as the scholar of religion continues his task,” I don’t find much openness toward or guidance to the discovery of either the unknown territories or the corresponding maps. The basis for this claim is the inclusiveness of the maps that Smith drew for us, particularly if the third map

is included; and, interestingly, this third map has usually been overlooked, likely due to the gesturally naturalized blindness resulting from “the very seriousness of our quest.” We are naturalized to prefer categories with names and articulated distinctions, clear definition, the resolution of tensions by the discovery of meaning and the statements of explanation. The entire academic enterprise from preschool to graduate school seems bent on the gestural naturalization of forcing conclusions and providing correct answers. Smith provides a vision for moving beyond the limitations of our style and objectives. We must realize that following the standard objectives rarely produces satisfying results. Unfortunately, results that allow us conclusions usually release us from our subjects, halt the processes, distance us from ongoing creative encounters.

In “Map Is Not Territory” Smith introduces and describes three maps; he names but two. Most prominent of the three, at least historically in the study of religions, is what Smith terms a *locative* map. “It is a map of the world which guarantees meaning and value through structures of congruity and conformity.”⁵⁷ This map correlates not only with the broadly held Western folk understandings of religion as being basically “good” and providing “meaning to life” and “answering those thorny questions” that seem answered nowhere else, yet it also correlates with the gesturally naturalized ideals for the academic enterprise that is directed toward “uncovering” or “discovering” truths and laws and meanings (all supposedly hidden or opaque; even to these “others”?) with a sense of authority won by intellect and reason and fact.

The bulk of Smith’s “Map” lecture is an exploration of the dynamics introduced by incongruity. Myth, Smith understands, is not some account of primordiality (“in the beginning”), it is singularly application, that is, the creative encounter of story (and tradition) with situation, ever changing. As myth changes or stabilizes change over time, the creative encounters of myth with experience in its application change myth, giving it a history. Tradition is the constant emerging difference identified by a continuity of sameness over time through the encounter of application, the presence of difference and incongruity. The dynamics of application arise only when incongruity is perceived, felt. Experience of the religious type then proceeds in these terms. Smith notes that “it is precisely the juxtaposition, the incongruity between the expectation and the actuality that serves as a vehicle of religious

⁵⁷ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 292.

experience.”⁵⁸ Smith, here, is not referencing anything special (mystical) as the marker that distinguishes experience as religious, but rather he indicates the banal felt presence of incongruity, the disturbing feeling (so ordinary to life) of the absence of fit. Should we recall that Smith describes his attraction to the study of religion as being based in the seeming prominence of, the trafficking in, incongruities (which he expresses as things that make him laugh), we can appreciate that his (and certainly my) persistent interest in the study of religion is how utterly delightfully (even delightfully disturbing) are the incongruities that we consider religious.

Smith gives the label *utopian* to his second named map. Although he offers few examples to satisfactorily establish this alternative as an equally important map type, he describes it as a “map of the cosmos . . . which perceives terror and confinement in interconnection, correspondence and repetition. The moments of disjunction become coextensive with finite existence and the world is perceived to be chaotic, reversed, liminal. Rather than celebration affirmation and repetition, man turns in rebellion and flight to a new world and a new mode of creation.”⁵⁹

In terms of his baseline of “place” terms as the language for the articulation of coherence/incoherence, the locative map is one that seeks place, while the utopian map is one that seeks no place or perpetually some new or unconfining place. What is fascinating to me is that—as Derrida reflected on the possible end or goal of play, he showed that even the choice between play and not play is halting⁶⁰—these two maps, named and seemingly complementary, are both based on the felt experience of incongruity, presenting different reactions to the creative encounter this felt experience initiates and fuels. As Smith is adamant that we not see these maps as representing any “particular culture” and that they remain “coeval possibilities,” nonetheless as named/labeled categories they both tend to default to the locative map. We have the urge to ignore Smith’s warning and label particular religions or religious movements or figures in terms of these two maps, yet doing so ignores the power of the ordeal of incongruity.

What ceaselessly captivates Smith’s interest is incongruity. Despite his statements of rejection of the “in the presence of” experience in his “Reading Religion” lecture, in “Map” he describes a banal experience that, in this 1974

⁵⁸ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 301.

⁵⁹ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

⁶⁰ Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” 265.

lecture, he attributes as formative to his “work for the last fifteen years.” As a young man Smith worked for a time for a dairy farmer. He noticed something that seemed odd to him. The farmer washed his hands when entering the house after work, yet on leaving the house to tend the animals he picked up soil and rubbed it over his hands. Smith held this experience as the touchstone (or at least a frequently told anecdote) for his understanding of place. Place matters to what is considered appropriate or fitting. Inspired as well by Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* (1966), Smith understood that whole categories—for example, weed and dirt—envelop this sense of the relevance of place. Gesture, habit, and context shape coherence; coherence is a feeling that arises not from some reasoned calculation or ontological given, but from practice and expectation, repetition and location.

Perhaps to acknowledge that there is a locative habituation to the very articulation of two maps despite his warning, Smith ends his “Map” lecture by describing a third, yet unnamed, map. In this “Map” essay, the most important of his insights (to me, certainly), yet commonly overlooked, relate to his description of a third map. Smith writes,

The dimensions of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appear to belong to yet another map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.⁶¹

Smith’s identification of “these traditions” and even his description of this perspective as a “map of the cosmos,” both of which seem to defy his warning in the very next paragraph that these maps “are not to be identified with any particular culture,” is his own, perhaps unwitting, inability (not being sufficiently self-conscious) to escape the gestural naturalization to the locative expectations of some ideas of both religions and academic work. Yet what must be appreciated as Smith’s signal inspiration and insight—what I believe was at the core of the balance of his career—is the introduction of the dynamics of the “necessary incongruity” and his recognition that this incongruity is

⁶¹ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

inseparable from “religious experience,” but also inseparable from the proper academic study of religion.

Of the three maps, only the third, unnamed map is actually viable as reflecting a real territory; and territory is essentially important I believe. Place (being in place), meaning, fit, congruity, coherence all function as ideals or goals and, as such, shape the play of experienced incongruities and incoherencies. If achieved, all of these descriptors would indicate a static, dead system, a collapse of the difference between map and territory in the real world of application. Thus, it is impossible to understand the locative (or even the map) apart from the experience engaged and articulated by fit, or, more likely, its felt absence. The so-called utopian is but a deductive alternative that must exist along with a posited locative map; a requirement of reason. Both these maps are inconceivable, at least as useful maps, apart from the unnamed third; and it had best be understood in more dynamic language, such as play and joke, rather than as the nominal term “map.”⁶² The concept “map” itself is inconceivable apart from the implied necessary double-face of being at once the same as territory and also different, a replication but also a transduction. The very notion of the map coinciding exactly with territory is inevitably itself a joke; Lewis Carroll explored this identity in a clever passage in *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889) that humorously considers the consequences of a map with a scale of “a mile to a mile.”

There is no way to even comprehend Smith’s concluding statement that “maps are all we have” as other than a riddle or joke. Nor can we understand this statement that he prefers his own Holy Sepulcher (a church made of words) to the brick and mortar Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem as anything but a provocation, a riddle. Much has been made of Justice Clark’s designation of the study and teaching of religion as being about, a history and description of, some other as the critical legal (in the United States) criterion for a proper study of religion. One would suppose this criterion of objectivism simply indicates that the scholar/teacher stands outside of or apart from the object of our attention. In Smith’s seeming proclamation that we have but maps, is he not, by riddle, raising the most profound and difficult concern of encounter, of how we as scholars, or even as nonacademic folk, come to know and encounter those who are not us? Rather than preaching rigid, and thus halting, conclusions, Smith has always preferred the vitalizing structurality

⁶² In other writings I’ve often suggested substituting the gerund “mapping” for the noun “map” to maintain the sense of comparative action, the play of coherence/incoherence.

of jest and riddle. We cannot read his statements that all we have are maps and that he prefers his Sepulcher made of words without either considering him irrationally impossible or the presenter of a riddle whose wisdom we cannot ever quite finish contemplating, as is the nature of riddles.

The Glory of the Ordeal of Experience

In my understanding, Smith, perhaps in defiance of Justice Clark's distinction, found that both religions and the nonreligious study of religion are distinguished by the foundational dynamics of human vitality. We might have expected this connection of things religious to vitality, yet, even in making a clear and essential distinction between a religious and a properly academic study of religion, Smith charts this study as characterized by the everyday dynamics that distinguish our humanness. He expresses this nowhere better than when he articulates his understanding that religion is present largely in the everyday, in the banal. "We [scholars of religion] have not been attendant to the ordinary, recognizable features of religion as negotiation and application but have rather perceived it to be an extraordinary, exotic category of experience which escapes everyday modes of thought. But human life—or, perhaps more pointedly, humane life—is not a series of burning bushes."⁶³

In an effort not only to be humane, but also to come to terms with and to appreciate what it means to be humane, the academic study of religion must embrace a necessary double-face, one turned toward the "other" ("the world of other men") and one toward relentless academic self-reflection even self-reference. We are forever ontologically separated from the "others" we study (maps are all we have); yet our very humanity, the realization of being humane, is embraced in the "ordeal of incongruity" that is our ongoing work, which includes honoring and holding as primary the ontological reality of the territory (our subjects). Smith says, "In between is where you always are."⁶⁴ A proper academic study is one that relentlessly embraces the jest and riddle "map is not territory—maps are all we have"; it delights in the dynamics, the uncertainty, the incongruity, the ordeal, the movement of the in-between.

⁶³ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 308.

⁶⁴ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 12.

There is no answer to whether my dancing somehow is or is not of value to my proper studies of religion compared with Smith's preference for reading religions, not because there is no question, but because the question itself is something of a riddle that gives rise to an ordeal of incongruity. Smith seemed to construct the cleverest, if often subtlest, of riddles, but they functioned as dense nuggets demonstrating his theory of religion, his theory of a proper study of religion, and they engage a kind of experience that is both fundamental to religions (those lived by "other men") and also to proper religion scholarship.

Smith's sense of experience, which I believe pervades his work, is present in application (never final, always unfolding), in the ordeal of incongruity (never resolving in final congruity), in repetition and practice (by both religious practitioners and scholars) in which each iteration is rewarding and opening to increasing insight simply in its repetition. The scholar, like the dancer, lives—finds her or his value and motivation and reward—in the experience of practicing her or his trade, including both the remarkable *nowness* of each moment of awareness and the absolute delight in the performance of the skills accumulated over time that allow one to be fully present and engaged.

4

Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion

The Arrernte, a culture residing in Central Australia, and “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole,” a classic example used by Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) to support his definition of religion, stand at the crossroads of two other storytracks, a crossroads in the academic study of religion. What I’m referring to as “storytracking” is inspired by the songlines of the Australian Aborigines, whose songs commonly track figures across landscapes, telling the stories of their travels. As an academic method it is a number of things, yet in its most direct application it is the comparison of a text version as presented in an academic report with the text version as it appears as the report’s cited source. The comparison helps reveal the motivations and extent to which the text is transformed through its presentation. This method is used by Jonathan Smith in his remarkable study of Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* as well as Eliade’s use of the Numbakulla story.¹ Following the chain as far as possible in the attempt to get to the actual cited initial source, this method produces the story, or storytrack, that interconnects the scholar with the independent subject.²

The Numbakulla story, critically analyzed by Jonathan Smith and further by me, has been shown to be largely Eliade’s concoction. Since the Arrernte story played a large role in defining religion for academic studies in the mid-twentieth century, the story of its concoction and use is important to understanding what has been meant by the term “religion,” how comparison serves the study of religion, and what constitutes the use and interpretation of texts in the study of religion.

On several occasions during the 1950s and 1960s,³ Mircea Eliade referred to an Arrernte text he had concocted, in accordance with his generic

¹ Smith, “Glory, Jest, and Riddle”; and Jonatan Z. Smith, chapter 1, “In Search of Place,” in *To Take Place*.

² For a fuller discussion of the method see Gill, *Storytracking*, 34–40.

³ See Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in Josué V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructuralist Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 73–81.

understanding of religion, to establish explicitly that “the religious” is synonymous with “the sacred center.” In 1987 Jonathan Z. Smith extensively criticized this aspect of Eliade’s work, showing, first, that Eliade’s principal examples—the ancient Near East, India, and the Arrernte—do not support the pattern he attempted to establish and, second, that while the “religious” is expressed and enacted in terms of “place,” it is done in a manner much more complicated and varying than Eliade allowed.

The storytracks of Eliade and Smith are two courses along which the academic study of religion has developed. To analyze their crossing on this so-called Arrernte example offers the opportunity both to further develop and clarify storytracking as theory and method and to reflect critically on what should be a proper academic study of religion.

Eliade’s Storytrack

Eliade’s storytrack traces patterns throughout the history of religions. The outline of these patterns and relationships is discernable in the paragraphs preceding his presentation of the “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole” example in *Australian Religions*: “For the Australians, as well as for other primitive societies, the world is always ‘their own world,’ that is to say, the world in which they live and whose mythical history they know. Outside this familiar cosmos lie amorphous, unknown dangerous lands, peopled by mysterious and inimical ghosts and magicians. . . . These strange lands do not belong to their ‘world’ and consequently still partake of the uncreated mode of being.”⁴

In Eliade’s view, primitive societies and archaic peoples are exemplars of the religious life. They are the least affected by history, which Eliade often saw as “terrifying.”⁵ Australians, as *ab origine*, are exemplary of the religious life. Their supposed primordality is why Eliade, along with so many others, was interested in Australian Aborigines. As hunter-gatherers, though contemporary, they were acknowledged for being preagricultural, remnants of the Stone Age.⁶

⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 42.

⁵ See the final chapter, “The Terror of History,” in Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶ The source Eliade cited for his Numbakulla example, W. Baldwin Spencer and Francis J. Gillen’s book *The Arunta*, is subtitled *A Study of a Stone Age People* (London: Macmillan, 1927).

For Eliade, cosmos (“world” or “home”) is a religious conception. It is the real, the known, and the familiar. The domain outside of world or cosmos is chaos, uncreated and unreal. Cosmos has positive connotations: home and familiarity. The area beyond cosmos has negative connotations: dangerous, inimical, strange, uncreated, and chaotic. People know the world in which they live not only physically but also as “mythical history,” that is, the story of its origination, of its first inhabitants: “Yet even the most arid and monotonous landscape can become a ‘home’ for the tribe when it is believed to have been ‘created’ or, more exactly, transformed by Supernatural Beings.⁷ Giving shape to the land, the Supernatural Beings at the same time made it ‘sacred.’ The present countryside is the result of their work, and they themselves belong to a realm of being different from that of men.”⁸

Cosmos, home, and land (more or less synonymous) are “sacred” (i.e., religious) because they are given shape and meaning by supernatural beings. Eliade’s view of religion depends on the existence of separate (i.e., ontologically distinct) realms (the realm of humans and the realm of supernatural beings), separate kinds of beings (humans and supernaturals), and separate kinds of time (human time and the time of the primordium, the beginning time): “The epoch when the Supernatural Beings appeared and began to transform the world, wandering across immense territories, producing plants and animals, making man as he is today, giving him his present institutions and ceremonies—this epoch was the ‘Dream Time.’ . . . This mythical time is ‘sacred’ because it was sanctified by the real presence and the activity of the Supernatural Beings.”⁹ The human world is dependent on the supernatural world in that it was created, given order, and made “real” by divine action, which occurred in the beginning time. Myth, as narrative, presents the history of the actions of the supernatural beings in the beginning time. The presence and action of the supernatural beings in the beginning time are the grounding for reality, cosmos, order, and meaning—in short, for the religious.

While myths tell the history of creative actions of the supernatural beings in the remote time of creation, this time can be “reactualized” by human beings through the enactment of ritual. As Eliade writes: “But like all other species of ‘sacred time,’ although definitely remote, it is not inaccessible. It can

⁷ Eliade here reveals his bias about the Australian landscape that he never saw.

⁸ Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 42.

⁹ Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 42–43.

be reactualized through ritual.”¹⁰ Ritual is modeled on the creative and transformative actions of the supernatural beings. To perform ritual is to replicate the acts of the gods, and thereby it is a means of reactualizing the beginning time, the religiously most potent time: “Everything which fully exists—a mountain, a water place, an institution, a custom—is acknowledged as real, valid, and meaningful because it came into being *in the beginning*.”¹¹

Eliade builds a tightly interrelated special vocabulary: *religious, primitive, cosmos, supernatural being, in the beginning, real, meaningful, valid, myth* (i.e., sacred history), and *ritual*. Human beings are religious when they live in a world that is created, transformed, or founded by supernatural beings in a primordial time whose history is recounted in myth. Human beings act religiously when they replicate and thereby reactualize the creative acts of the gods.

While “in the beginning” denotes the religious in temporal terms, it is the center that denotes the religious in spatial terms. To make this point Eliade calls on the Arrernte example of “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole.”

Numbakulla arose “out of nothing” and traveled to the north, making mountains, rivers, and all sorts of animals and plants. He also created the “spirit children” (*kuruna*), a very large number of whom were concealed inside his body. Eventually he made a cave or storehouse, [in which] to hide the *tjuringas* that he was producing. At that time men did not yet exist. He inserted a *kuruna* into a *tjuringa*, and thus there arose the first Achilpa (mythical) Ancestor. Numbakulla then implanted a large number of *kuruna* in different *tjuringa*, producing other mythical Ancestors. He caught the first Achilpa how to perform the many ceremonies connected with the various totems.

Now, Numbakulla had planted a pole called *kauwa-auwa* in the middle of a sacred ground. . . . After anointing it with blood, he began to climb it. He told the first Achilpa Ancestor to follow him; but the blood made the pole too slippery, and the man slid down. “Numbakulla went on alone, drew up the pole after him and was never seen again.”

One day an incident befell one of these mythical groups: while pulling up the *kauwa-auwa*, which was very deeply implanted, the old chief broke it just above the ground. They carried the broken pole until they met another

¹⁰ Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 42–43.

¹¹ Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 43.

group. They were so tired and sad that they did not even try to erect their own *kauwa-auwa* “but, lying down together, died where they lay. A large hill, covered with big stones, arose to mark the spot.”¹²

In the midst of this account, Eliade writes: “This pole is charged with important symbolism and plays a central role in ritual. The fact that Numbakulla disappeared into the sky after climbing it suggests that the *kauwa-auwa* is somehow an *axis mundi* which unites heaven and earth. . . . the *axis mundi* . . . actually constitutes a ‘center of the world.’ This implies, among other things, that it is a consecrated place from which all orientation takes place. In other words, the ‘center’ imparts structure to the surrounding amorphous space.”¹³ The center place is then the religious place. It is where human beings have access to the supernaturals who withdrew back into their world at the conclusion of their creative actions in the beginning time, and it is the place that provides orientation—and thus defines cosmos, real, and meaningful—for religious human beings. Eliade dramatizes the importance of this center by citing the instance in which the Tjilpa ancestors died when they broke their pole: “Seldom do we find a more pathetic avowal that man cannot live without a ‘sacred center’ which permits him both to ‘cosmicize’ space and to communicate with the transhuman world of heaven.”¹⁴

Eliade’s view of religion largely determines the religious in his culturally and historically specific studies; that is, only what conforms with this view is seen as religious. By the time Eliade arrives at the study of Australian religions, it appears that his understanding of religion has become for him the primary reality. The abstract and universal character of his view of religion corresponds with his view of hierophany, that is, that the truly real stands, in principle, apart from its specific historical manifestations. His understanding of religion provides a grid, a lens, by which not only to recognize the patterns and actions that define religion among cultures throughout the world but also to simulate aspects of a particular tradition so that it will adequately fit the reality. His abstract model is no longer a map of some territory; rather it engenders the territory. In his study of Australian religions, Eliade is certainly not developing and revising his theory of religion with Australian data (an accommodative process), nor is he apparently content to

¹² Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 50–53.

¹³ Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 51–52.

¹⁴ Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 53.

understand and interpret Australian culture by the instantiation of his model of religion on Australian cultural and historical materials (a projective process). While evidence of the latter operation is present, Eliade is, to an extent, also creating an Australian Aboriginal simulacrum based on his generic understanding of religion. However, this critique of Eliade's study of religion must not be confined only to his study of Australians. His approach to comparison and his essentialist understanding of religion are academically questionable in the extent to which they unite to create simulacra of religions, as in the Numbakulla text.¹⁵

Eliade's approach to and understanding of religion has in many respects established the academic study of religions throughout the world. His introduction of categories of place—time and space—not only assisted in the study of diverse religious traditions but also provided a language not explicitly theological at a time, the mid-1960s, when the academic study of religion was being established in state-supported American universities.¹⁶ Much of the academic study of religion remains, to some extent, on this storytrack. Although I think it is no longer so fashionable to base an academic study of religion explicitly on Eliade's work, I believe it will be a long time before the essentialist and nonscientific foundations implicit in his seemingly neutral categories and methods will be adequately acknowledged and critically engaged.¹⁷ But it may no longer be possible to fully realize the degree to which studies conducted in this manner have created simulacra that are now considered, indeed have become, primary realities. Storytracking may at least reveal the otherwise tacit methods. The study of religion from the perspective of Eliade's storytrack involves using the methods of comparison to recognize, in the diversity of cultures, the familiar patterns of "the religious," as he understood it, despite their being dressed in a multiplicity of culturally specific guises. The comparative task focuses on identifying, and simulating where necessary, sameness despite diversity. From Eliade's track, one sees as

¹⁵ See chapter 2 of Gill, *Storytracking*, for this critical analysis.

¹⁶ This explosive expansion of the study of religion beyond seminaries was stimulated by the US Supreme Court ruling that distinguished between teaching religion and teaching about religion. This distinction allowed state-supported schools to legally establish departments and courses in religion. Eliade's neutral-sounding language of place offered important terminology for this nontheological teaching about religions.

¹⁷ I mean nonscientific in the sense in which conclusions arise from certain unchallenged beliefs rather than from carefully argued and negotiated hypotheses, as well as in the sense that his simulations or concoctions of religious cultures are not grounded in eventual comparisons of scholar-independent reality. Such an approach, taken in order to ensure that value in the world is based on an otherworldly reality (and Eliade's approach often appears to be grounded here), should also be characterized as "religious."

religious what conforms with the definitive patterns; one simulates examples to fill gaps and thereby complete the patterns. The task appears to be directed less at comprehending religion as it occurs throughout the diverse world, though this is often the stated motivation, than at establishing a particular generic view of religion—an academic theology—as the pervasive reality.

Smith's Storytrack

Jonathan Smith's storytrack critically evaluates principles, methods, theories, and approaches to the academic study of religion. For Smith, religion is a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. . . . It is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's 'situation' so as to have 'space' in which to meaningfully dwell."¹⁸ According to Smith, as an academic term, "religion" denotes a second-order category or idea that has existed in the human imagination only during the last few centuries. Religion, but not specific religions, "is solely the creation of the scholar's study."¹⁹ Religion is an academic category by which to study aspects of the diversity of culture. It is not the study of a given set of phenomena that can be distinguished by being somehow religious (as Eliade's approach would have it). Smith holds that "there is no data for religion."²⁰ The study of religion for Smith necessarily demands being "relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his [the religion student's] primary expertise, his foremost object of study."²¹ Thus for Smith, the question of theory, of approach, is everything.

In part because of Eliade's powerful and persistent emphasis on place, whose character is relevant to the way in which people designate order and meaning, place has become a common and widely discussed religious and cultural category. In some respects, following Eliade, place has been a persistent concern of Smith's approach to the study of religion. He holds that

¹⁸ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 90–91.

¹⁹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi. I also believe that it is a term invented in the popular modern Western, and later worldwide, engagement among various peoples. The frequent popular use of the English term "religion" around the world is not the invention of the scholar and then disseminated to popular (folk) culture; it is part of the common terminology of designating certain types of activities and organizations found in most, if not all, cultures.

²⁰ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

²¹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

once an individual or culture has expressed its vision of its place, a whole language of symbols and social structures will follow.²² Widely discussed is his articulation of place in terms of the two categories, or kinds of religious maps, that he labels “locative” and “utopian.” A locative vision of the world emphasizes place, whereas a utopian vision values being in no place.²³ Numerous works within the academic study of religion have followed from Smith’s discussion of these categorizations. Unfortunately, many of these studies, by taking Smith’s categories as definitive, use them as a grid or a lens to see (or to simulate?) familiar patterns in specific religions. Indeed, the locative category correlates well with a centered view of the world as described by Eliade. But to my reading, Smith’s discussion of place is much richer and more complicated.

What Smith describes as maps makes better sense to me if they are thought of as mapping *strategies*. Locative and utopian as categories represent the extreme positions on a continuum. Neither, in practical terms, is possible to obtain or maintain for any length of time or on any significant scale. The very impossibility of these positions indicates that they are ideals, goals, or tendencies rather than categories. Furthermore, in almost every real situation, the closer one becomes to either of these positions, the more interesting and powerful the other appears—which demonstrates that locative and utopian are interdependent, rather than separate, positions. In actual religious cultures, the interaction between these polar positions is what is almost always operative, not the realization of either position. Smith’s locative and utopian categories, then, become ways of describing religious strategies, all of which then occur as the play between the incongruities.

Smith describes a third map, or as I prefer, mapping strategy, that supports my interpretation. Perhaps because he leaves it unlabeled, I believe it has also gone unnoticed. This strategy focuses on Smith’s favorite theme, incongruity, or the issue of fit. As Smith considers comparison, mapping, living, and scholarship, he acknowledges, following Paul Ricoeur, that “incongruity gives rise to thought.”²⁴ It is the presence of difference, the lack of fit, that makes things interesting. Incongruity is the sign of vitality: “The dimension of incongruity . . . appears to belong to yet another [besides locative and utopian] map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous

²² Smith, “Influence of Symbols,” 141.

²³ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 308–9.

²⁴ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 294.

elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.”²⁵

Importantly, Smith believes that similar dynamics should also be present in the methods of the academic study of religion. This similarity is expressed in terms of incongruity. Of the academic enterprise, he writes: “We need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men.”²⁶ This correspondence will be dealt with more fully.

Smith’s understandings of myth and ritual follow closely his views on the importance of fit in regard to place. In sharp contrast with Eliade, Smith rejects the long tradition of scholarship that upholds the distinction between the primal moment of myth and its secondary application. He believes that “there is no pristine myth; there is only application.”²⁷ In other words, myth as narrative is used by cultures as a “strategy for dealing with a situation.”²⁸ Smith believes that religious cultures use myth to instigate comparison between the elements in the narrative and the aspects of the lived situation to which it is applied. Myth, more than a charter, is the instigator of thoughtful comparison: “There is delight and there is play in both the fit and the incongruity of the fit between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world or of experience which is encountered. It is this oscillation between ‘fit’ and ‘no fit’ which gives rise to thought. Myth shares with other forms of human speech such as the joke or riddle, a perception of a possible relation between two different ‘things.’ It delights, it gains its power, knowledge and value from the play between.”²⁹

In Smith’s understanding of ritual, incongruity appears to play a different role. He understands ritual largely in terms of its measure of control. Smith argues that in the course of life, it is usually impossible to control what happens. Ritual solves this problem because it “*represents the creation of a controlled environment* where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced *precisely* because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful.”³⁰ Thus, for Smith, ritual resolves the incongruities that are experienced in the course of life. Unlike myth, which itself

²⁵ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

²⁶ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 309.

²⁷ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 299. For a similar statement see Smith, “Good News,” 205–6.

²⁸ Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” 97. Smith borrows this phrase from Kenneth Burke.

²⁹ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 300. For a very similar passage see Smith, “Good News,” 205–6.

³⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 63.

creates and plays among incongruities in the thought-provoking processes that are religious because they engage in a “mode of constructing worlds of meaning,” ritual resolves the incongruities that are a given aspect of life. Seen from another angle, Smith holds that ritual is performed in marked-off places. A ritual place “is a place of clarification (a focusing lens) where men and gods are held to be transparent to one another.”³¹ Consistent with his view that ritual resolves incongruity, ritual is seen as clarifying or as focusing, as the domain where those things that do not make sense outside of the ritual space are clarified and resolved.

Incongruity is key to Smith’s understanding of both myth and ritual as principal components of religion. However, the respective role of incongruity for the two differs significantly. On the one hand, myth introduces incongruity in order to give rise to thought and thus stimulates and motivates the meaning-creation mode that Smith defines as religious. Ritual, on the other hand, seems to work at resolving the incongruities that are present in life outside of ritual. Here there seems to be a shift in Smith’s appreciation of the provocative nature of incongruity. Ritual appears to serve the ideal, the “ought”—determined somehow outside of and prior to the respective rites—by resolving incongruity and by clarifying. In this way ritual articulates both the recognition of incongruity and its fictive resolution.

Smith’s storytrack runs crosswise to Eliade’s. The latter is a noncritical and non-self-reflective trajectory, bearing little if any motivation to engage Smith’s track. Yet as a highly self-reflective approach, Smith’s track gains strength and clarification in the process of criticism and comparison with other tracks. Smith is a persistent critic of Eliade. He occasionally seeks out common data precisely to criticize what he believes is Eliade’s methodologically unsound reliance on familiar patterns and established concepts. He goes beyond criticism to demonstrate a more reasonable (in his view) methodology, grounded on a close reading of the common data. In one major instance, Smith takes the opportunity to criticize and compare his and Eliade’s approaches by focusing on the Arrernte text “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole.”

³¹ Smith, “Bare Facts of Ritual,” 54.

Crossed Tracks

Smith's Critical Analysis of Eliade's Interpretation

Smith presents an extensive criticism of Eliade's reading of "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" in "In Search of Place," the first chapter of his 1987 book, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. In Smith's analysis, Eliade focused his interpretation on nine elements of the myth.³² To evaluate Eliade's interpretation of the Arrernte text, Smith compares Eliade's account with its source, Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta* (1927). Smith shows that only one of the nine elements in Eliade's interpretation "can be accepted as Eliade has proposed them." Three elements (3, 6, and 9) are rejected entirely; five elements (1, 2, 4, 5, and 8) require revision.³³ Eliade's presumed pattern of "center" forces him to "misread the text." Smith writes: "By focusing on the false causal relationship—from broken pole to corporate death—Eliade has missed the actual structure of the narrative."³⁴ In response to his discovery of Eliade's misreading, Smith offers "an alternative understanding of the myth."³⁵

By analyzing the sources of the text,³⁶ Smith discovers that the first part of the text—where Numbakulla creates the world, ending with his climb up the pole—occurs only in Spencer and Gillen's *The Arunta* (1927). The second part of the text—dealing with the travels of the ancestors, the breaking of the pole, and the death of the ancestors—is published in both the 1899 and 1927 editions of Spencer and Gillen's work on the Arrernte. Citing Theodor Strehlow's observation that the Numbakulla prologue was concocted for Spencer in 1926,³⁷ Smith concludes that this portion is "an awkward

³² Smith, *To Take Place*, 6, summarizes these elements as follows:

1. The pole was fashioned by Numbakulla from a gum tree.
2. After anointing the pole with blood, Numbakulla climbed up the pole and disappeared into the sky.
3. The pole is a "cosmic axis."
4. Following Numbakulla's withdrawal, the pole plays a ritual role.
5. The pole is always carried about by the ancestors in their wanderings.
6. The ancestors determine the direction in which they travel by the direction toward which the pole bends.
7. The pole is broken by accident.
8. The ancestors die because the pole has broken.
9. This is because the breaking of the pole is like "the end of the world."

³³ For Smith's detailed critique, see *To Take Place*, 125–27.

³⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*, 9.

³⁵ Smith, *To Take Place*, 33.

³⁶ As fully analyzed in chapter 1 of Gill, *Storytracking*.

³⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 124.

hybrid,”³⁸ probably “a Christianized reinterpretation of Arandan myth.”³⁹ Smith proceeds to his alternative reading by “putting aside the misleading and extraneous prologue of the myth of Numbakulla and his ascent up the pole.”⁴⁰ Thereupon Smith restricts his analysis to the incidents of the broken pole and the death of the ancestors. He reports that he examined ninety-four incidents recorded by Spencer and Gillen but ignored by Eliade⁴¹ in order to interpret these two incidents “set within their narrative frame.”⁴²

In his presentation of an alternative understanding, Smith focuses on four of the ninety-four incidents that make up the ancestral travels. All four incidents are intended to illustrate Smith’s conclusion that the ancestral narrative is “an itinerary: the ancestors journeyed from this place to that; something happened; for this reason, the place is called ‘so and so’; a feature in the present topography either was formed by or memorializes this event; the ancestors moved on to another place.”⁴³ In light of what Smith believes is the typical narrative structure as determined by his analysis of the broad narrative context, he argues that the incidents of the broken pole and the dying ancestors are “not extraordinary, highly dramatic events to be lifted out and focused upon as having special cosmic significance. They are commonplace happenings within the myths of ancestral times.”⁴⁴ Smith contends that “Eliade has missed the actual structure of the narrative. Each incident has two parts (again, typical of ancestral narratives): event and memorial.”⁴⁵ He concludes his analysis: “By dissevering the double structure of event-memorial, Eliade has missed the generative element of the myth. It is, above all, an etiology for a topographical feature in the Aboriginal landscape of today. It is the memorial that has priority.”⁴⁶

Smith cites the academic literature on the Arrernte and on Australian Aborigines in general to support his extension of this alternative reading into a description of the Arrernte understanding of place: “It is anthropology, not cosmology, that is to the fore. It is the ancestral/human alteration of and objectification of the landscape that has transformed the undifferentiated

³⁸ Smith, *To Take Place*, 5.

³⁹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 5.

⁴⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 5.

⁴¹ Eliade summaries these incidents in a single phrase: “seemingly endless detail of wanderings of the first Achilpa Ancestors after the disappearance of Numbakulla.”

⁴² Smith, *To Take Place*, 6.

⁴³ Smith, *To Take Place*, 7.

⁴⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*, 8.

⁴⁵ Smith, *To Take Place*, 9.

⁴⁶ Smith, *To Take Place*, 10.

primeval space during the Dreamtime into a multitude of historical places in which the ancestors, though changed, remain accessible. This is expressed in the myths.”⁴⁷

Although Smith acknowledges that there are numerous issues that might be productively considered in this myth text,⁴⁸ he centers on the “event/memorial” pattern because it “will allow us to juxtapose two quite different understandings of the Tjilpa myth and, by extension, two quite different ways of conceiving of place within the study of religion.”⁴⁹ In other words, Smith selects the issue that has the most potential to engage an intersection of storytracks that define the proper academic study of religion.

In Smith’s analysis, the establishment of Eliade’s pattern of the “sacred center” depends on only the Arrernte example and the Near Eastern examples that Eliade drew on from the pan-Babylonian school. Having criticized the Arrernte example, Smith turns to the Near Eastern examples, where he determines that “there is no pattern of the ‘Center’ in the sense that the Pan-Babylonians and Eliade described it in the ancient Near Eastern materials.”⁵⁰ This leads Smith to conclude that “the ‘center’ is not a secure pattern to which data may be brought as illustrative.”⁵¹

Smith compares anew the Arrernten materials with the ancient Near Eastern materials. In contrast to Eliade’s comparative style, Smith finds that it is the differences that are most illuminating and provocative. In the Arrernten view of place, he argues, topographical features are a byproduct of ancestral journeys, while the ancient Near Eastern materials reflect a strong intentionality and deliberateness concerning the construction of place.⁵² When freed of the expectations concomitant to the pattern of the “center,” Smith suggests that we might “classify and compare differences with respect to place.”⁵³

From an academic perspective, Smith calls into question Eliade’s pattern of the “center” on the grounds that the principal examples Eliade uses to establish the pattern—Arrernten and ancient Near Eastern—do not hold up to critical evaluation. In this criticism of a major element in Eliade’s tightly interwoven set of concepts that articulates his view of religion, Smith calls

⁴⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 11.

⁴⁸ Smith describes other significant themes and issues raised by his analysis of the text in an extended footnote. Smith, *To Take Place*, 128–30 n. 31.

⁴⁹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 10.

⁵⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 16.

⁵¹ Smith, *To Take Place*, 17.

⁵² Smith, *To Take Place*, 18.

⁵³ Smith, *To Take Place*, 22.

into question Eliade's whole theory. Smith also criticizes the academic method that is more or less synonymous with Eliade's program, that is, comparison motivated by the desire to find similarity or sameness. Since Eliade's understanding of religion is not so much theoretical as it is ontological, Smith's challenge is far more than academic.

Critical Analysis of Smith's Alternative Interpretation

To appreciate Smith's work on the Arrernte, it is important to comprehend that he is not, strictly speaking, presenting (as he states) an alternative to Eliade's interpretation. They are not reading the same texts. Eliade concocted an Arrernte text driven by his view of religion. Thus, Eliade's intention in presenting the Arrernte text is not explanation or illustration, as Smith considers it to be. Smith divides Eliade's text presentation into two parts: a prologue, relating Numbakulla's acts of creation, and the broken pole and ancestral death incidents extracted from an ancestral narrative. Smith uses a historical argument to set aside the prologue, allowing him to focus on the ancestral narrative. His interpretation of the prologue as the product of Christian influence is presented summarily.⁵⁴

In not following further the interpretative study of the prologue, Smith pursues the Arrernte conception of place, which he finds discernable in the ancestral narratives. He is motivated to interpret Arrernte myths by his interest in establishing a theory of ritual based on "place" and in challenging Eliade's views and academic methods. The broken pole and ancestral death incidents in Eliade's account are only two of more than ninety incidents that Smith interprets in the myth text from Spencer and Gillen's *Native Tribes*. Although Smith focuses his interpretation on these two incidents, his interest

⁵⁴ It is interesting that Smith did not make more of the information indicating that Charlie Cooper had concocted the "prologue" of this story for Spencer's benefit. Although Smith notes this (Smith, *To Take Place*, 22 n. 15), had he taken it seriously he could have dismissed this part of the text as bogus or a joke. While the prologue might be a text documenting "Arrernte individual practices as ethnographic informants" and, therefore, be "saved" as relevant to the study of Arrernte culture and history, this limited significance of the text should be clearly stated. What interests me is what appears to be the sacrosanctity of any text. Somehow, despite much evidence that many documents are not what they appear to be, we never seem to want to reject any text. However hyperreal or fallacious, anything presented as text makes an almost overwhelming claim to be real, as demonstrated by the attention given to the works of Carlos Castaneda and even (though I resist even mentioning her name because of the very principle I am discussing) Marlo Morgan (you will not find her in the bibliography).

is in the whole narrative, and thus the text he interprets is technically not the same as that considered by Eliade.

The broken pole incident is within the accounts of the so-called middle wanderings of the Tjilpa ancestors, which were recorded by Gillen sometime between April 17 and May 15, 1897. The Arrernte raconteurs were almost certainly Aboriginal English-speaking “police trackers” or “stock boys” who worked for Gillen at Alice Springs, or perhaps they themselves were the storytellers.⁵⁵ These accounts are divided into four sections, each one confined to the one group, or “column” in Gillen’s terms, of traveling Tjilpa ancestors. Spencer edited Gillen’s journal for inclusion in *Native Tribes*. His revisions were significant, but compared to other examples of his editing, the published account generally reflects Gillen’s journal. For *Native Tribes*, Spencer maintained the group (or column) designations, numbered from 1 to 4, as indicated by Gillen. However, for the publication of these accounts in *The Arunta*, published decades later, Spencer reorganized them. The first and fourth groups were exchanged in identification, as well as in place. Spencer added significant general commentary and several pages of new material between the first (the former fourth) group and the second.

In the attempt to confirm Smith’s view of the structure of these narratives, I have analyzed the entire story in a manner similar to Smith’s;⁵⁶ that is, I have divided the narrative into camps or named places.⁵⁷ I was able to identify ninety camping places,⁵⁸ mostly on the basis of place names. A few places are indicated but not named. For each camping place, I noted and tabulated the significant actions. Based on the analysis of these camping places, I can make a number of observations.

The narrative, as Smith indicates, is an itinerary. Camping places are almost always named, and frequently their location is described, often in reference to places known to late nineteenth-century European Australians. These non-Aboriginal identifications were, I suspect, developed by Gillen’s

⁵⁵ The outline presentational form would support the latter.

⁵⁶ The results of this analysis are summarized in Gill, *Storytracking*, 188–94, table 1. Further, to show the relationship between Gillen’s journal account and that edited by Spencer for W. Baldwin Spencer and Francis J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1899), I have juxtaposed both versions of the accounts related to the third group, that is, the group whose journey concludes with the broken pole and the ancestor’s death.

⁵⁷ My sources are Spencer and Gillen’s *Native Tribes*; Spencer and Gillen’s *Arunta*; and Gillen’s unpublished journals, Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide, South Australia.

⁵⁸ While I made this determination on both the Spencer and Gillen published sources and Gillen’s unpublished journals (the latter of which Smith did not examine), I was unable to identify ninety-four places as reported by Smith.

informants for his benefit or added by Gillen, since they would be both unnecessary and irrelevant to Aborigines. Occasionally the route of travel is described, almost always with reference to waterways or mountain ranges. On two occasions, the ancestors traveled underground; on other occasions, they entered and exited the ground but did not travel.

Although not in the published text in *Native Tribes*, Gillen's journal account notes that a pole, the *kauaua* or *nurtunja*, is erected at every camp. As Smith indicates, the presence of poles is consistently significant. The length of these poles appears to be important: longer seems to be better; short poles may be cause for embarrassment.

Ritual performances are the single most common type of event at a camping place, being performed at fifty-four of the ninety places. Often the ceremony is described by Gillen as *quabara undattha*, which Spencer usually renders as "sacred ceremonies" or "Engwura." Circumcision rites (*ariltha*) are performed on twenty-one occasions, most of them in addition to other ceremonies. A long series of ceremonies called *ampurtanurra* (in *The Arunta* Spencer presents this term as *ungperta-ngarra*) and associated with the Tjilpa group is performed seven times.

A dominant narrative feature, associated with forty-six camping places, is who is present at the location when the ancestors arrive, that is, whom they meet when they arrive at a camping place. Those who are met are almost invariably identified by totem group, social subclass,⁵⁹ relative age, and gender. Occasionally the people encountered at a specific location also originated there; that is, the narrative describes them as having "jumped up" there. The names of these individuals are frequently given by Gillen, indicating their importance to the Arrernte, but the names are almost never included by Spencer. Almost without exception, the narrative indicates whether or not these persons have rituals (i.e., I think, whether they own the right to ritual performance) and a pole. Sometimes, if a pole is present, its general length is indicated.

Descriptions of the interactions between the ancestors and those people found in the camping places constitute the bulk of the narratives for many camping places. The narratives usually recount whether or not ceremonies are exchanged or shared between groups.⁶⁰ Often there are ritual exchanges.

⁵⁹ See Gill, *Storytracking*, chapter 6, for a description of the four-class social system.

⁶⁰ This information, of course, correlates with the principal actions of the Arrernte at these locations; it is the interactions performed by those whose totem group storytracks intersect at a specific location.

On several occasions the male ancestors have sex with a woman met in a camp. In one incident much is made of the fact that this sexual act is in violation of the ancestors' ritual law. The spread of a sexually transmitted disease called *Erkincha* is considered the result of this ritual violation. The Tjilpa ancestors observed another group performing cannibalistic acts. Sometimes, because those encountered at named camping places owned ceremonies, they were able to avoid the traveling ancestors, even to avoid sexual intercourse with them. This suggests the power or potency of owning rites. A minor but significant narrative element is that, unbeknown to the traveling party, they are sometimes seen by others as they pass a given location, or others are in the vicinity of a place but the traveling party does not see them.

Another significant inclusion (twenty-seven instances) is whether a person or persons are left at the camp when the ancestral group moves on. Who they are—number, class, totem identity, name, gender, and age—is usually given, as sometimes is the reason for their being left. Commonly, the narrative notes that a descendant of a person left behind by the ancestors presently lives at that place.

There are several minor themes of significance identifiable in these “wandering” incidents. Memorials are indicated for fourteen of the camps. Typically, these are stones or hills that arise at a camping place to memorialize some event, sometimes just that the place is a campsite. Three of these memorials are unnamed places, with simple descriptions of a geological feature, indicating where the pole was erected at the camp. Two of these are *tjurungas* that are kept in storehouses, each representing a deceased ancestor. One group of stones marks the burial place of a man the traveling ancestors killed for his offensive sexual conduct. A group of stones arose to mark a dancing place. Two memorials are hills that arose to mark the place of a significant event—one where a group of ancestors died, the other where a ritual mound had been formed. One group of stones marks where a group of ancestors were drowned and entered the ground.

Only six places (and two of these can only be discerned from Gillen's journals) have place names connected in any way—at least in any clear way to a non-Arrernte speaker⁶¹—with the distinctive appearance or character of

⁶¹ Since the names of places are given in the Arrernte language, it is possible that, were the meanings of the place names translated, they would correspond with significant events. Géza Róheim indicated such a correspondence in *The Eternal Ones of the Dream: Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Australian Myth and Ritual* (New York: International Universities Press, 1945), 210–13. However, for this analysis it is irrelevant because no one has provided any indication of the meanings of these place names and there is no evidence, other than Róheim's study, that they correspond with events. Further, the

the physical place they designate.⁶² At six of the camps, groups of men either contracted or died from the disease named *Erkincha*.⁶³ Two of the memorials are associated with the death of ancestors due to this disease: one records the appearance of a group of *tjurungas* and the other the appearance of a large hill to mark the spot where they died.

At four camps the ancestors changed their language, and at four camps the old men who had grown tired were refreshed when the young men cut their arms and gave the old men large drinks of their blood. At one camp the young men drank their own blood.

The ancestral leaders of these groups have very long, erect penises, which are so cumbersome that they threaten the progress of the groups. On one occasion, an ancestor's penis digs a furrow in the ground as it is dragged along. These descriptions of genitalia occur only in Gillen's journals, although occasionally Spencer attempts a highly euphemistic reference.

According to Smith's understanding, "ancestral narratives," as widely distributed in Australia, have the structure of an "itinerary," which he describes in terms of five elements:

1. The ancestors journeyed from this place to that.
2. Something happened.
3. For this reason, the place is called "so and so."
4. A feature in the present topography either was formed by or memorializes this event.
5. The ancestors moved on to another place.⁶⁴

Smith illustrates this pattern by presenting two incidents from the Tjilpa "wanderings" narratives. The first one accounts for the name *Uritchimpa*, meaning "the place of the *pitchis*," and the second selection accounts for the name *Ulirulira*, meaning "the place where blood flowed like a creek."

descriptions of the events found in the outline myths in *Native Tribes* are inadequate in detail to correlate event to place.

⁶² *Ulit-ulira* means "where blood flows like a river." *Ungwurna-la-warika* means "where bone is struck" (Gillen has it as "where the man was struck by the bone"). *Alla*, according to Spencer but not so indicated in Gillen's journal, means "the nose"; Spencer writes (again without support from Gillen) that it designates "a sharply outlined bill." *Okinchalanina* is referred to by Gillen, though not carried to the published version by Spencer, as "the necklace." Spencer writes that *Lilpuririka* "means running like a creek," though Gillen did not record this. Gillen notes (Spencer did not use this information) that *Unjiacherta* "means the place of the *Unjiamba* men." *Urichipma* means "place of *pitchis*."

⁶³ *Erkincha* is a sexually transmitted disease that is often referred to in the Tjilpa stories.

⁶⁴ Smith, *To Take Place*, 7.

However, from the preceding analysis we now know that of the ninety places only six are in any way, at least explicitly in the text, connected with the etiology of the place or place name, and for only one of these is there a relatively clear association of the place name with the events the narrative describes as occurring in that place. Smith emphasizes element number 4, the event/memorial structure, as that which most characterizes the actual structure of the whole itinerary. Yet at only fourteen out of ninety camping places is there any mention of a memorial and only four of these memorials are landscape features that correspond with significant ancestral events described in the narrative.

Thus, in Smith's analysis of the five elements, numbers 3 and 4 are not only atypical but actually quite exceptional. This leaves only structural elements number 1, the ancestors journeyed from this place to that; number 2, something happened; and number 5, the ancestors moved on to another place. Elements 1 and 5 are effectively the same, the coincidence of point of origin and terminus; thus there remains only the rather indistinctive iterative structure of elements 1 and 2: the ancestors travel to a series of places, at each of which something happens.

Smith continues his analysis by showing that the Tjilpa narratives are consistent with the general pattern he has described: "The Tjilpa ancestors come to a place. They meet an individual or another group that has a sacred pole and/or other sacred objects. (Indeed, the lack of a pole is thought worthy of notice.) These objects are shown to the Tjilpa. Some mode of social interaction transpires between the wandering Tjilpa and the indigenous inhabitants—most usually a ceremony, but sometimes acts of violence or sexual intercourse. The Tjilpa ancestors then move on."⁶⁵ This sets the context in which Smith focuses directly on the two incidents of interest to Eliade: the broken pole and the resulting ancestral death.⁶⁶ Smith's analysis is intended to demonstrate the "event/memorial" structure of these two incidents and to show that Eliade did not see this structure.

Certainly, as far as Smith's alternative explanation of the "broken pole" incident is concerned, his emphasis on "event/memorial" identifies structural elements that appear in at least these two episodes of the "wandering" narratives, although, at least according to my analysis, he overstates his evidence by calling them "typical narrative units."⁶⁷ More significantly, Smith's

⁶⁵ Smith, *To Take Place*, 7.

⁶⁶ Incidents 78 and 79; Smith, *To Take Place*, 7.

⁶⁷ Smith, *To Take Place*, 8.

alternative explanation that “the generative element of the myth . . . is . . . an etiology for a topographical feature in the aboriginal landscape of today”⁶⁸ cannot be supported by the text he analyzed.⁶⁹ The narrative clearly assumes the prior existence of every one of the camping places and almost all of the features of the landscape. In only a few cases, such as those in which a hill or stones arose as a memorial, does the landscape become transformed as a result of the presence of the ancestors, and these hills remain unnamed. In

⁶⁸ Smith, *To Take Place*, 10.

⁶⁹ It appears that on this point Smith may have been significantly influenced by Róheim, whom he quotes to corroborate the interpretation that in the Arrernten view “the environment is made out of man’s activity.” In *Eternal Ones of the Dream* (210–11), Róheim indicates that place names are derived from ancestral events as told in myths, and he supports this interpretation by offering examples from a number of myths. His evidence often amounts to the translations of place names that have explicit sexual and genital associations. Some examples, all of which come from myths Róheim collected, are illustrative:

In a Pirjantara wildcat myth of Kikinkura (Mulga-seed) a place is called “Inflate the nose” because an angry old man inflated his nose there; a tree marks the spot. Two stones were originally two black iguana men. A place is called “Throws it” (Wanpurangu) because a ceremonial spear was thrown there. Where a *tingari* ceremonial spear was put up, a soakage arose. The place where a fence was made is called “Fence.” . . . In a Ngatatari version of the Testicles and Semen myth, in which the heroes take out their teeth the place is called “Teeth.” They put on a public tassel for the first time: the place is called “Pubic Tassel.” They pulled their testicles out, the place is called “Testicles.” Then they looked at their penes and the place is called “Penis.” Where they defecated the place is called “Excrement,” where they urinated it is called “Urine.” (212)

Róheim did not develop or replicate this correlation between action in the landscape and place names elsewhere in his work that I have found.

In materials that Smith did not cite, there is evidence for other strong correlations between myths and “names.” Theodor Strehlow, *Songs of Central Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971), indicates that totemic ancestors “‘named’ various objects and living things encountered by them in order to gain magical control over them; hence each ‘name’ or verse tends to be a self-contained unit. But while ‘magic’ of this sort can be effective only if it is combined with the real ‘name’ of the object, it is necessary for the member of the totemic clan concerned to know also the correct symbolic action with which the singing of the verse had originally been associated” (146). Strehlow confirms Smith’s interpretation of the ancestral narratives as itineraries: “It (the story) lists all the places he [the totemic ancestor] visits in his wanderings and lays down the route of his travels with high geographical accuracy” (147).

Through a comparison of myth with corresponding sets of song, Strehlow illuminates much that is distinctive of myth and song. He understands that place names, which appear extensively as itineraries in myths, are so important because of the correlation between geographical location and personal identity: “Every man’s genealogy has, as it were, been imprinted into the countryside; and the myth which mentions the name of his own conception site may be regarded as the birth certificate which entitles him to his share of the religious ceremonies of his group, and as one of the legal documents which define his social standing in his own community” (158). Whereas myths mention place names and describe in detail the actions of the ancestors at each place, the place names rarely occur in songs; yet it is in the songs that places are described in scenic detail. “The *tjurunga retrnja*, the ‘secret name,’ of a place is very frequently a couplet which describes the scenic setting of the sacred site without actually naming it” (159).

Although it has yet to be established, in Arrernten mythology there may be a significant relationship between place names and their etiology. Certainly, place names are centrally important to ancestral narratives. However, Smith’s statement about the generative element of myth cannot be established on the basis of evidence drawn from the myth he analyzes, and I find no evidence that the statement might be founded in any extant body of Arrernte mythology.

only one incident is it relatively clear that the name of the place is the result of events recounted in the narrative. Although some attention is directed in the narratives to the location of named camping places, every one of them existed before the ancestors visited them, as did the waterways and mountains. The prior existence of these places is emphasized in that for over half of them, people are present when the group arrives and the names of places are given to identify travel destinations.

Although Smith holds that “an alternative understanding of the myth [i.e., the Arrernten myth presented by Eliade] must be proposed,”⁷⁰ the effect of his approach is to partially reconstruct the myth, presenting isolated exceptional incidents as typical, to support an alternative understanding. But Smith and Eliade are not “reading” the same text. Smith’s alternative amounts to another reconstruction of a text drawn from elements selected from the Spencer and Gillen published sources.

The Academic Study of Religion

Storytracking is a method by which to construct and compare narratives of coherence that present various interpretive perspectives about a given subject. In the preceding sections I have constructed partial storytracks for Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Smith. I chose to focus on these two scholars because of the measure of their contribution to the academic study of religion. In constructing these tracks, I have attempted to examine some basic principles underlying their work. I have constructed each narrative in anticipation of, and in hopes of, illuminating the crossing of these tracks. In the previous section, the crossing of these tracks was concretized by focusing on the “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole” materials. Storytracking provides the frame for comparison, in which each perspective accounted for may in turn be occupied as the position from which to evaluate other intersecting storytrack perspectives. Storytracking prepares us to first take up Smith’s position to evaluate that of Eliade and then to stand in Eliade’s to evaluate Smith.

Thus, for example, from the perspective of Smith’s track, Eliade is undone, is wrong, and is replaced. Eliade’s view of religion, his understanding of the comparative enterprise, his treatment of the Arrernte—all are “wrong,” at least in some respects; minimally Eliade’s claims are overstated. His views

⁷⁰ Smith, *To Take Place*, 6.

and positions are to be replaced, decidedly with those presented by Smith. Yet, from the perspective of Eliade's storytrack, it might be said that Smith has been too narrow; he has not looked broadly enough to Arrernten and other Australian Aboriginal materials. What of the emu-footed man? What of the casuarina tree that serves as a ladder to the sky?⁷¹ What of the broad ritual use of poles? And so on. Do these not function in some ways as center places? Do they not designate religious importance? What of the Aboriginal conjunction of the present with mythic time? Are not all Aboriginal acts somehow repetitions of the acts of the mythic ancestors? And, most important of all, Smith surely cannot deny that this understanding of religion fits so many cultures other than the Arrernte, so many, in fact, that it is impractical even to attempt to recite them all. Given these possibilities, how could the Arrernte not also fit?

Any of dozens of points of comparison could easily be pursued in this fashion. However, a more powerful frame of comparison is offered by storytracking when the comparative vantage is apart from any of the storytracks traced. Here storytracking is a method of critically evaluating and extending the purposes and interests of the various stories tracked. In this case, the crossing of Smith's and Eliade's storytracks gives me the opportunity to comprehend and attempt to advance issues and approaches related to the proper academic study of religion. By comparing Smith and Eliade on the basis of my own interests and concerns, I am able to more fully understand them, but I am also able to more fully understand and meaningfully engage in the academic study of religion. I will not only place Eliade and Smith in the context of issues I select; I will also attempt to show how the storytracking approach suggests meaningful development of these issues.

Religion

What is meant by "religion"? For decades it has been a term widely discussed and controversially defined. Most religion scholars have grown weary of the effort and have lost interest in the discussion despite the widely accepted principle that a word that cannot be defined is a word of limited academic value. Such a conundrum as the title by which the field—the academic study

⁷¹ As indicated in the Strehlow Research Center exhibit in Alice Springs. See Gill, *Storytracking*, chapter 5, for this account.

of *religion*—is identified is no small reason for broadly felt discomfort and embarrassment.

Eliade's understanding of the term "religion" is based on an a priori belief about what it means to be human. Although he seemed uninterested in its academic history, he unhesitatingly used the term to identify the human perception of that which has impetus and origin beyond human agency, most frequently termed "the sacred." It is synonymous with the real and the true. Religion, that is, the human apprehension of and response to the sacred, is grounded in that which is received, revealed, and discovered. The sacred breaks into the human world from other-than-human realms and in doing so gives the human world meaning. Although the sacred is itself ineffable, it nonetheless manifests itself in distinctively religious patterns that make up a category of phenomena. With respect to their origin and structure those things that are religious are *sui generis*, that is, unique. Eliade held that the study of the religious for nonreligious interests, such as sociology and anthropology, is reductive and misses the religiousness of the subject. Religion is adequately comprehensible only to those who know the distinctive patterns of manifestation and appreciate that they are manifestations of "the sacred." It seems that the fundamental premise for this view is outside of the academic purview. Eliade's is an essentialist view of religion. Yet it must not be forgotten that this essentialism, in practice, becomes a pervasive relativism.

Eliade understood human history as only a stream of unrepeatable events and accidents, having no meaning. Seemingly overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of history, he sought to ground whatever meaning was found in history in extrahistorical reality. Meaning arises in the experience of history, or to cast it more in Eliade's mood, "suffering becomes intelligible and hence tolerable"⁷² only when seen in the light of the extrahistorical, which Eliade identified as evidenced in myth ("sacred history"), the accounts of the actions of supernaturals. History makes sense only in light of the story of the gods. The historically concrete is secondary to the extrahistorical because it is on the basis of the extrahistorical that the historically concrete can be comprehended as meaningful. Eliade's abstract generic understanding of religion correlates with the extrahistorical grounding of meaning. It makes it possible for him to identify as meaningful the otherwise random and unrelated concrete elements of diverse cultures through time. Eliade's generic understanding of religion functions in the study of religion as the

⁷² Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 98.

extrahistorical does in the history of religions. His understanding of religion is more real, more dependable, than any of its historical and geographical manifestations. Apart from the meaning bestowed on history and culture by his model, the concrete historical and cultural materials are meaningless and random. Eliade's understanding amounts to an academic theology, and it is questionable as the basis for a proper academic study of religion.

Jonathan Smith's understanding runs counter to Eliade's view. For Smith, religion is a mode of human creativity. It is always historical and cultural. Religion owns no particular set of data; it is a category invented only a few centuries ago to facilitate a peculiarly Western and academic effort to make sense of a diverse human world. The term is significant primarily within the academic community that invented it, and it is not a term that arises from or is somehow part of the identities of those subjects that are designated by its use. Smith directs the understanding of religion to a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning." For Smith, religion is human-based and this-worldly. He reinjects history and human historical actions as the ontological basis for comprehension and meaning. The unique,⁷³ the extrahistorical, are in themselves incomprehensible realities, if indeed they exist, unsuitable for academic study because no reference can be made to them other than the historically and culturally specific.

To Smith, religion and its many constituent subdivisions are always propositional, always in the process of development and refinement. It remains at least possible that the academic constructions termed religion can be deconstructed, rejected, or replaced. History (encompassing the cultural), for Smith, is the realm of greater reality when compared with academic constructs. It is the absence of fit, the gap between academic construct and the subject reality that vitalizes the academic process, that is always negotiable.

The storytracking perspective offers insight into Eliade's and Smith's strategies of defining religion. The technical difficulty faced in the definition of religion is that many of the subjects that students of religion want to include make absolute claims. The claims are routinely described as being based on a spiritual, nonobservable, and ineffable reality. Taken individually, these claims are seen as uncompromisable, unconditional. For example, religions commonly make claims about the creation of the world, the existence of world-creating gods, the foundation of truth, and the destiny of human beings and the entire world. The problems arise in the attempt to

⁷³ Smith offers a major critique of the "unique" in *Drudgery Divine*, chapter 2.

comprehend and affirm these unconditional, often mutually exclusive and unverifiable, claims, both individually and collectively. The very character of the academic enterprise, demanding verifiable sources and a rational argumentation, seems to oppose the subject studied. I believe that both Eliade's and Smith's definitional strategies have been developed in the attempt to resolve this confounding problem.

To define religion as the ineffable or based on the ineffable, as Eliade often seems to do, allows the acceptance of multiple unconditional claims. All such statements fall equally within the domain of the unexplainable. The price paid by this strategy, at least as an academic strategy, is high. Given an interactionist approach to interpretation and given that interpretation is the work of the study of religion, the subject reality must have a structure that constrains instantiations of theory made upon it. The ineffable or the incomprehensible has no graspable or identifiable structure; thus, it will allow any arbitrary interpretations made of it. Studies of religion based on this kind of nondefinition are "religious" in character, that is, they are conducted on the basis of nonpublic experiences defined and described within a single identifiable religious perspective. To hold that all religion is founded on the incomprehensible is to negate the particularity and distinctiveness of religions in any terms other than the diversity of human responses to the unfathomable. This approach mystifies religion beyond the reach of academic study. Directed toward the study of the history of religions, this approach focuses on apprehending "the sacred" in its diversity of historical and cultural manifestations, based on the unquestioned premise that the sacred manifests itself as "the center" and "in the beginning." This approach, when presenting itself as the academic study of religion, has been an insufferable admixture of religiously and academically motivated studies, interpretations, and preceding simulations, reflected oddly in the commonly used field name "religious studies." To the extent to which the study of religions is understood as being inseparable from apprehending the ineffable, or even the study of patterns of manifestation based on an *a priori* unverifiable assumption, the field falls short of being academic, though it may serve the beliefs of religious scholars. The difficulty with this understanding of religion is that the study of religion must become, in part, the manufacture of simulacra, bearing only the flavor or terminology of various historical and geographical specificity so as to appear real. Unchecked, this approach may become a weightless system, a self-referential hyperreality, unmoored from any reality outside itself and referring to nothing that it has not itself constructed.

Smith's strategy, meanwhile, shifts the grounds to the "lookers," the academics. Religion is an affair of the academy. In this strategy, religion is an academic category used to investigate how a variety of human cultures engage in the business of making the world meaningful. Truth claims, statements of belief, and so on are seen in this perspective as methods by which cultures make life meaningful. This approach saves religion as a legitimate and possible subject for a proper academic study. Yet, from the perspectives of those subjects that are identified as religious, this view may appear to dilute and even to deny what they consider singular and unconditional claims, to ignore that ineffable source that is most fundamental. From the perspective of some, indeed most, specific traditions, the academic study of religion, understood in these definitional terms, may seem insensitive and hostile. Furthermore, when religion is defined so broadly and vaguely as a "mode of constructing worlds of meaning," few human actions are immediately excluded as potentially religious.

Despite these problems, Smith's views must be developed if there is to be hope for a proper academic study of religion. Storytracking suggests ways to contribute. It suggests, following Smith, that "religion" is a term that makes sense only when seen in a ludic frame—the frame of metaphor, irony, and joke. Religion, in this light, is seen as not only embracing the mutually exclusive, the logically incompatible, but also thriving on the insights offered by such a double or multiple perspective. Current metaphor theory, that, for example, presented by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,⁷⁴ holds that metaphors are preconceptual; that is, they are the materials from which concept networks are constructed. Metaphors are powerful precisely for the reason that they not only conjoin but also equate two things that clearly are not even in the same category. To appreciate its power, religion must be seen in similar terms.

By permitting perspectives in conflict and by embracing perspectives that are mutually exclusive, storytracking enriches the academic understanding of religion. By inviting multiple and conflicting truths and objective perspectives, storytracking qualifies truth and relativizes objectivity, yet qualified truth and relative objectivity are oxymoronic. Indeed, a storytracking approach to the academic study of religion, as it appears in this second frame of comparing perspectives from the outside, participates in the realm of such structures as oxymoron, metaphor, joke, and play. This

⁷⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

approach to the academic study of religion must be appreciated as engaging that frame of mind in which one may both accept objectivity and truth in the radical sense of singularity and, at another phase of the oscillation, qualify and relativize such positions. A storytracking approach both appreciates the distinctiveness, authority, and groundedness of each subject perspective and acknowledges that, when compared, the perspectives may conflict with one another, be mutually exclusive, or claim to be based in realms beyond academic purview.

There are correspondences between this storytracking view of religion and Smith's discussion of a third, unnamed map. In this map, people allow incongruities to stand, seeking, "rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought."⁷⁵ According to this view, in practical terms, all religious actions, all that we would term religion, exist in the middle territory of negotiating differences, playing among incongruities. Indeed, these are the key dynamics and operations Smith identifies as religious. Religions, then, are vital on precisely the same terms as they are foundational to the academic study of religion. The name I would suggest for Smith's unnamed, third map, or as I prefer to understand it, mapping strategy—would be "religion."

Category theory is another related perspective from which to consider the definition of religion. The strategy by which the academic study of religion has attempted the definitional task has been to use what George Lakoff has discussed as a classical theory of category.⁷⁶ Classical category theory is an objectivist theory in which a category is seen in set theoretical terms. The feature that distinguishes any member of the set must distinguish all members of the set. Certainly, a review of definitions of religion confirms that this key distinctive feature is invariably sought. The most common distinction of religion has been the belief in God or gods. This is the definitional criterion, but it also functions in studies of religion even when definitions are not explicit. For example, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies of small-scale cultures, then called "primitives," centered on "high gods" because their presence was the distinctive feature that marked the existence of religion.

Lakoff's analysis of classical theory shows that it is inseparable from a set of "familiar ideas":

⁷⁵ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 309.

⁷⁶ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

- Meaning is based on truth and reference; it concerns the relationship between symbols and things in the world.
- Biological species are natural kinds, defined by common essential properties.
- The mind is separate from and independent of the body.
- Emotion has no conceptual content.
- Grammar is a matter of pure form.
- Reason is transcendental in that it transcends—goes beyond—the way human beings, or any other kinds of beings, happen to think. It concerns the inferential relationships among all possible concepts in this universe or any other. Mathematics is a form of transcendental reason.
- There is a correct, God’s eye view of the world—a single correct way of understanding what is and is not true.
- All people think by using the same conceptual system.⁷⁷

Lakoff’s analysis has, it seems to me, remarkable implications for the issue of defining religion. It appears that no matter how religion is defined, the definition will be constrained by the familiar ideas wedded to the operative category “theory,” in this case the classical theory. Not only are these ideas central to Western thought, but also many of them are fundamental to Judeo-Christian thought. Defining religion is then doubly grounded in classical category theory and the Western religious view.

Lakoff shows that while classical category theory and its assumptions have been espoused, categories generally function more in the terms of his proposed prototype theory of category. Although the theory is complex and cannot be considered fully here, we can immediately appreciate the significance of developing categories, and thus definitions, on the basis of prototypes, or best examples. Once a best example is generalized as a category, other examples may be included by principles of extension. Lakoff’s view illuminates the existing practice of defining religion, as well as the difficulty experienced in attempting to state definitions. Although I have not made a full study of definitions of religion, it seems clear that in most of them Christianity, or more broadly Abrahamic traditions, has served as the best example of religion.⁷⁸ Other religions have been incorporated in the category by some principle of extension. For example, some traditions feature belief in

⁷⁷ Lakoff, *Women, Fire*, 9.

⁷⁸ If there is any doubt that Christianity has served, though occasionally tacitly, as the best example of religion, one need only read Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*

more than one god. While the prototype calls for belief in a single god, multiple gods may be included by a principle of extension. Other principles have functioned. For example, rendering the Western religious ideas of a belief in God in terms of the generic “ultimate concern” allows the religion category to include even traditions that are nontheistic as long as they seem to hold some principles or beliefs as being beyond question. Chains of extensions serve to increase the category still centered on the best example. Even these simple extensions of category make utterly complicated, if not impossible, the statement of a distinctive defining feature demanded by classical category theory.

While religion, as a modern academic category, has developed more on the order Lakoff describes as a prototype theory, it has carried out its definitional task in classical theoretical terms, and it has attempted to support the underlying assumptions of the theory. Definitions of religion are never open in the sense of being negotiated in light of the diversity of experiences one may encounter geographically and historically because the tacit assumptions doubly bind us. Hidden to the definitional process is the prototypical role of Western monotheistic traditions, and it hides the favorite ideas that are implied by the operative classical category theory. Doubly bound by tacit elements, the definition of religion can never be more than the production of a precession of simulacra, asserting itself as a colonist map that engenders a world in denial of all incongruous territory.

It is often noted that Eliade’s understanding of religion was most influenced by his studies and personal experiences of Indian mysticism. However, it cannot be doubted that his discourse about religion and his studies of the history of religions rest firmly on distinctively Western assumptions of classical category theory.

Of Smith’s understanding of religion in light of this discussion, more can now also be said. By emphasizing map rather than mapping strategy, it seems to me that Smith reveals a residual classical category theory. He wants containers in which to put examples of things that share the same set of distinctive properties. He names the locative and utopian map categories. He discusses their distinctive characteristics and offers examples that fit into these categories. By doing so, he encourages others who perhaps unwittingly hold a classical category theory to use these categories as models for other analyses. Thus, his third, unnamed, fuzzy category remains mostly

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). This book is remarkable in demonstrating how the academic study of religion has been almost single-mindedly Christian in its development.

overlooked. However, I believe that Smith, through his persistent attention to difference and incongruity, broadly challenges classical category theory and the ideas that accompany it. Furthermore, it almost goes without saying that Smith's view of religion—at least, what I have teased out of his third, unnamed mapping strategy—would displace Christianity or Abrahamic traditions as necessarily the best example of religion. Or at least it would demand these traditions to be seen anew. Should the implications of classical category theory be recognized as concerns in a proper academic study of religion, Smith's many studies that emphasize incongruity would provide a productive point from which to begin a reexamination and revision. The results would be a radical transformation of the discipline.⁷⁹

Comparison

Comparison is a focal issue in Smith's critique of Eliade.⁸⁰ Eliade's understanding of comparison is to use familiar patterns as a grid or measure against which to comprehend the common patterns or structures among the disparate data of diverse cultures and to thereby apprehend the presence of "the sacred." The cultural elements that match the given patterns are recognized as religious or as aspects of religion.

Eliade's method is a morphological style of comparison that shares much with comparative anatomy, which served historically as its source. Morphological comparison is structural, ahistorical, and phenomenological. Even the developmental implications of such terms as *primitive* and

⁷⁹ Notably, a certain corner of the academic study of religion has recently shifted away from the traditional, more theological categories to that of "place." One might suppose that this new emphasis is a strategy designed to move away from the confines of the ideas incumbent on classical category theory. Yet little can be gained in this endeavor unless it is seen that classical category theory is inseparable from the very ideas that scholars wish to abandon. While "place" appears less dependent on these ideas—it certainly has the appearance of theological and historical neutrality—it nonetheless serves as a way of describing containers into which sets of objects with common distinctive characteristics may be sorted. Smith's locative and utopian designations of place are such containers. Although Smith has strongly rejected the ubiquity of center as designating the religious place, the locative category corresponds closely with the ideas that accompany the center. A prototype category theory would, I believe, if acknowledged and applied in terms of the effect on assumptions, shift the academic study of religion away from place containers toward relational dynamics. The attempt to fit objects into containers would be far less interesting than appreciating how subjects interrelate. This does not at all amount to a rejection of all categories; rather, it is to see that within categories (such as religion) members of the category reveal different profiles from a variety of perspectives. From some perspectives they hide attributes seen from alternative perspectives.

⁸⁰ For a full discussion of Smith's complex writings on comparison see chapter 1, "The Necessary Double-Face."

archaic were not seen by Eliade as growth, progress, or development in time. Demanding historical and cultural needs have motivated this understanding of comparison. Eliade's work in religion responded to the conditions that arose in the late nineteenth century with the explosion of knowledge about thousands of cultures the world over, which was a byproduct of Western colonialism and a product of the rise of modern anthropology. This expansion was accompanied by a shift in the use of the term "culture" from the singular form of the word, which denotes the extent of development of a people, to the plural, "cultures," which denotes the set of traits, practices, and patterns that distinguish each group from other groups of people. In the face of such diversity, every effort had to be made to discover common bases—categories and patterns—by which the diverse peoples of the world might be interconnected. Eliade's program served this need in the area of religion. It served to define the religious for all cultures, no matter how exotic or different.

However, as the twentieth century progressed, it became apparent that the continued use of this comparative method tended to diminish, even deny, the differences that distinguish one culture from another. The success of this morphological comparative method had the effect of finding, or simulating if not present, the same patterns in every culture, no matter how otherwise diverse. For example, Eliade's discussion of the sacred center drew on ancient Near Eastern, Indian, and recent Australian Aboriginal cultures to represent the same religious pattern. Cultural and historical particularity and distinction were overlooked in the quest for universality.

Jonathan Smith challenged this comparative method, demonstrating that when materials are carefully presented in their historical and cultural particularities, they do not so precisely fit the familiar patterns. He showed that it is the distinctiveness, the incongruities, raised by comparison that are the more interesting. Differences give rise to thought; they demand the refinement of theory and method. Smith presented a model of comparison motivated by the discovery or illumination of difference. The gain is a fuller appreciation of the historically and culturally specific. Eliade's approach to Arrernte culture not only filtered out much but also concocted what did not exist. It allowed to survive only highly select passages in the Arrernten source texts, and these were severely transformed into simulacra. The surviving passages were the structural elements that matched, or at least suggested, the comparative grid Eliade used. Only the items that confirmed or suggested the sacred center and its associated premises were seen. When correlate items were not found, they were concocted. This process amounts to the deterritorialization

of the Arrernte. Smith's approach, in contrast, placed the items that were of interest to him and Eliade in their broader cultural and historical Arrernten and Aboriginal contexts in order to more carefully evaluate them, especially from the point of view of the culture concerned. His interpretive efforts were focused on and motivated by the differences that were revealed in this kind of comparative operation. As Smith describes the process: "A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being 'like' in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which *we* 're-vision' phenomena as *our* data in order to solve our theoretical problems."⁸¹

The storytracking approach engages at least two comparative frames. One type of comparative operation is framed within the subject field, determined by the various intersecting storytrack perspectives. Each storytrack is a valued perspective. The sum of storytracks that have a common intersection makes up the subject. In series, each storytrack provides a place from which to comparatively evaluate all other perspectives at play in the subject. Another type of comparison, consistent with Smith's approach, arises in being relentlessly self-conscious as the one constructing and comparing the storytracks within a cultural and historical situation. The frame, the category of sameness in which differences are examined, is of the scholar's choosing. Smith insists that the scholar must be relentlessly self-conscious in selecting theory and method or in choosing issue and subject, for these choices shape all that follows. The storytracking approach affirms the importance of this self-consciousness while acknowledging the enormous complexity and problematicity of comparison. This second frame raises, and must somehow address even if temporarily, the issue of comparison itself, which as Smith described it is this: "How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?"⁸² Or as Jacques Derrida wrote in his characteristic style: "We must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the difference of the irreducible difference."⁸³

Storytracking focuses on the issue of comparison by problematizing the relationship between and among the items compared, expressed effectively through the metaphors of gap and play. Storytracking follows Smith's lead in this respect: "Comparison requires . . . a methodological manipulation

⁸¹ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 52.

⁸² Smith, "In Comparison," 35. Smith is quoting Wittgenstein.

⁸³ Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 265.

of difference, a playing across the ‘gap’ in the service of some useful end.”⁸⁴ Also: “Comparison . . . is an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstruction which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary.”⁸⁵

Storytracking attempts a self-consciousness in two frames at once. That is, it attempts to recognize at once two kinds of gaps—the gaps among the proposed perspectives that constitute the drama of the subject and the gap that exists between the scholar (the storytracker or the comparer) and the field of the subject. Storytracking holds that comparison is possible only through the interaction of these two frames.⁸⁶

Certainly, comparison may occur in a serial fashion by indwelling any one or more of the perspectives represented as the complex subject. This comparison is facilitated or made possible by the identification, however fortuitously,⁸⁷ of the point of intersecting tracks. In the present example, we have shown that it is possible to compare Eliade to Smith and Smith to Eliade. The terms of the comparison are grounded at the crossing of their tracks, the identification of sameness or an arena of relatedness. Such comparison might be motivated to find either similarities or differences, but it can never

⁸⁴ Smith, “In Comparison,” 35. See also Poole, “Metaphors and Maps,” especially 417. Poole’s essay is one of the few technical discussions of comparison. For further discussion, see Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, especially chapter 2; Smith, “*Adde*”; and Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds.), “*To See Ourselves as Others See Us*”: *Christians, Jews, Others* in Late Antiquity (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 3–48.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 53.

⁸⁶ In more technical terms, as Smith (*Drudgery Diving*, 51) shows:

The statement “x resembles y” is logically incomplete for what is being asserted is not a question of the classification of species x and y as instances of a common genus, but rather a suppressed multi-term statement of analogy and difference capable of being properly expressed in formulations such as:

“x resembles y more than z with respect to . . .”

or

“x resembles y more than w resembles z with respect to . . .”

That is to say, the statement of comparison is never dyadic, but always triadic; there is always an implicit “more than,” and there is always a “with respect to.” In the case of an academic comparison, the “with respect to” is most frequently the scholar’s interest.

Storytracking embraces the level of self-consciousness that acknowledges that the scholar determines all the elements of comparison by choosing to focus on X, Y, Z, and so on, and as Smith shows, it is the scholar’s values that supply the property or value (the intersecting point) that determines the “with respect to.”

⁸⁷ I do not think fortuity has been adequately acknowledged. Despite the systematicity implied by the scientific methods of academia, chance is ever present. Fortunately, we can never predict what impact the aleatory aspect of the next event encountered will have on what we do. Scholarship only ceases to be vital when we inure ourselves to surprise. See chapter 5, “Smith’s Golden Bough,” for discussion of nonlinearity.

be legitimately performed without conceiving of common ground. The common ground is always, in some sense, a category. The category frames the comparison. It determines the terms of the comparison. It assumes that the subjects to be compared have at least some representation in the category that controls the comparison; otherwise comparison would be impossible. Comparison is considerably enriched if a prototype theory of category is self-consciously employed.⁸⁸

A second kind of comparison (theoretically inseparable from the first because it precedes and shapes it) arises in the acknowledgment that the storytracker (the scholar, the looker) has perspectives entirely separate from those of the subject studied. It is this perspective that shapes the vocabulary, the limitations, the type of category theory, and the extent of the storytracks charted within the chosen subject of study. It is this perspective that determines the terms of the comparison, accomplished largely by the selection of the intersection points of two or more storytracks. The academic operation that facilitates self-consciousness of this influence is itself comparative. The academic's storytrack, though often more tacit than the tracks of the subjects, also intersects them. The academic operations that are required to maintain legitimacy of the interpretations of the subject studied are comparative. The results of an academically framed comparison are on the order of constructing a gestalt, that is, some view of the whole that is different from the sum of its particulars.

Comparison represents the academic field of play. As the academic establishes the terms of comparison by designating storytracks and crossing places, this person creates and constructs domains of interplay between the motivating interests and needs of an academic study and the elements of the subject studied. The terms of comparison and the comparative analysis are the tools the academic wields or, to maintain the metaphor, the equipment or toys or moves or instruments by which the academic plays. The interplay may be infinitely creative, yet it is subject to the rules and boundaries that ensure the legitimacy of interpretations and the demonstration that interpretations created by comparison are adequately constrained by the structures of the subject reality.

⁸⁸ Lakoff's prototype category theory significantly affects the potential effectiveness of comparison. One way of appreciating prototype category theory, in contrast with the assumptions underlying classical category theory, is that it enhances our understanding of the ways in which differences may occur within the set that constitutes a category.

Interpretation

Interpretation, I argue, is the principal academic operation. All description, presentation, translation, and explanation imply interpretation. All comparison supports interpretation. Interpretation is motivated by the perceived condition of incongruity, incredulity, and incoherence. Interpretation is motivated by the emotional force of surprise or confusion. Interpretation is directed toward overcoming the gap, filling the chasm, by the creation and discovery of coherence. Certainly, coherence must be seen as a temporary and local achievement, serving issues external to the subject. Incongruity or incoherence is always a condition of particular relationships with a given subject, not a condition inherent to the subject. Coherence must be won through the application of local and temporary criteria of order and meaning. The interactionist approach to interpretation, to my understanding, is necessary.

In the case examined, Eliade did not appear to interpret his subject at all. Rather he presented the Arrernten example of “Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole” as illustration or exemplification of patterns apparently already won. But the storytracking analysis showed that even these apparent presentations were not without elements of interpretation, although tacit. In an interactionist model, Eliade used a projective method, that is, he kept his theory of religion invariant and reconstructed his subject, although beyond legitimate limits, to cohere with his theory. But from another point of view, both more satisfying and disturbing, it has been shown that, at least in this case, Eliade was not so much interpreting Arrernte culture as simulating how religion—the generic and universal religion he held to be the foundation of reality—ought to manifest in this culturally specific Aboriginal setting.

Smith presented an alternate interpretation to Eliade’s, which Smith had, through criticism, deemed to be erroneous. His treatment of his sources was for the most part overt and clear. The style of Smith’s presentation suggests an openness to the interplay between an accommodative style of interpretation, that is, where theories are adjusted in light of the subject, and a projective style of interpretation, that is, where theories are held invariant and instantiated on the subject. However, his interpretation that the structure of the ancestral narratives coheres on the principle of “event/memorial” also engaged in a projective method of interpretation that, like Eliade’s, overstepped the limits of legitimacy. Further, but at a different level, it may be suggested that Smith, rather than interpreting the Arrernte, was simulating a difference dressed in Arrernte garments to serve the terms of his preceding conviction

about the importance of difference in comparison in order to criticize Eliade and to establish his own position.

Notably, both Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson, who developed the models of accommodation and projection, saw them as interdependent, interactive, and oscillatory.⁸⁹ While it is possible to analyze human development into stages at which one or the other process is dominant, both are necessary to psychologically healthy human development. Either strategy practiced exclusively eventually constitutes pathology. Both psychologists represented the interaction and interdependence of these methods in the terms of play, that is, an oscillatory interplay of accommodation and projection. Academic studies can find inspiration and direction in these studies. Interpretation may be analyzable in terms of the distinctive interpretive methods: accommodation and projection. Yet in practice both must, in principle, be present. One is dependent on and interactive with the other. Each realizes its potential in terms of the force and constraining effect of the other.

Academic methods are often seen as linear and progressive, perhaps not unrelated to theories of human development. Accommodation is a process of theory formation. Theories are subject to alteration and development initiated by a response to the incompatibility of theory with data. However, as theory is refined, it attains a less negotiable status. Once this status seems clear, argumentation is replaced by exemplification, and eventually simulation replaces interpretation. Yet this process and the implied logical sequence are misunderstandings of theory and interpretation. Theory is of interest only as long as a “maybe not” accompanies the “maybe.” Theory is only one element in the required pairing that results in the construction of meaning. Theory and subject are always two sides of a chasm that must be in an interactive process of negotiation. While it may be possible to isolate and identify an instance of a projective method of interpretation, all instances should have some residual awareness that accommodation is also necessary. When theory is firmly established, exemplification becomes simply a covert practice of projective interpretation. Interpretation is always a process.

Simulation, which differs from exemplification in not having to be immediately constrained by subject reality, is in itself not illegitimate. However, it runs the high risk of being immediately devoured as real. In the absence of

⁸⁹ See, for example, Erik H. Erikson, “Play and Actuality,” in Maria W. Piers (ed.), *Play and Development* (New York: Norton, 1972), 127–67; and Jean Piaget, “Explanation of Play,” in *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (New York: Norton, 1962), 147–68.

the real, simulacra, though hyperreal, are usually not distinguished from the real. Reality devours simulation. The tendency is toward pure simulacra.

The storytracking approach firmly confirms the importance of the interpretative process. It is not a neutral or higher perspective from which to choose among other approaches. Rather it is a method of exercising responsibility in a situation in which the scholar accepts the creative freedom of interpreting the subject studied. A multiperspectival approach concedes at the outset that it is not possible to choose a single perspective, a single paradigm or model, that will produce truth or full satisfaction.⁹⁰ Storytracking rejects monism, pursues the multiperspectival, and requires that critical self-consciousness be present throughout the entire interpretive process.

The storytracking approach requires the oscillation or play between two concerns or two methods of interpretation, that is, accommodation and projection, and two logical frames, that is, the subject frame, which is autonomous to any attempt to study it, and the frame that conjoins the subject to the perspectives and processes by which it is studied. The second frame is defined as enabling the interactive interpretative enterprise that conjoins theory and subject, interpreter and interpreted. It affirms the absolute chasm between the interpreter and the subject interpreted by demanding that the construction work of interpretation, which attempts to temporarily bridge the chasm, be done self-consciously and self-critically.

The storytracking approach acknowledges as necessary and unavoidable the impact of the “lookers” on those who are being “looked at.” It affirms their inevitable interdependence while, at the same time, it depends on the absolute autonomy and independent existence of the “looked at.” The

⁹⁰ Notably, however, the multiperspectivity of storytracking obtains the criteria set forth by Lakoff, *Women, Fire*, 301, for a revised understanding of objectivity:

Objectivity consists in two things:

First, putting aside one's own point of view and looking at a situation from other points of view—as many as possible.

Second, being able to distinguish what is directly meaningful—basic level and image-schematic concepts—from concepts that are indirectly meaningful.

Being objective therefore requires:

- knowing that one has a point of view, not merely a set of beliefs but a specific conceptual system in which beliefs are framed
- knowing what one's point of view is, including what one's conceptual system is like
- knowing other relevant points of view and being able to use the conceptual systems in which they are framed
- being able to assess a situation from other points of view, using other conceptual systems
- being able to distinguish concepts that are relatively stable and well-defined, given the general nature of the human organism and our environment . . . from those concepts that vary with human purposes and modes of indirect understanding.

storytracking approach willingly accepts that subjects can never be wholly known; indeed, to be wholly or fully known makes little sense, given that meaning and knowledge are products of an ongoing, interactionist interpretive process. Storytracking celebrates the creative and constructive roles of explanation and interpretation without shirking the responsibility to strictly discipline such creativity. It accepts that the whole explanatory enterprise is as thoroughly motivated by the explainer's quest for self-knowledge as by any neutral, merely academic, or humane interest in the subject. The storytracking approach demands, in Sartrean terms, an openness to freedom and the accompanying acceptance of responsibility in the spirit of play.⁹¹

Style

The criticism of academic work rarely includes elements of style. Although style might be informally noticed, it is rarely considered to have more than incidental impact on the importance, acceptability, and influence of an academic work. I suspect we miss much by ignoring academic style—by which I include rhetorical, interpretive, presentational, and argumentational, as well as literary, styles. The comparative consideration of Eliade and Smith is revealing.

Eliade performed interpretation, if this be our critical perspective, as a covert operation, held tacit by the terms of a particular rhetorical style. Smith presents his interpretation openly, clearly, and almost formally. The differences in style are of considerable interest. Smith's critical, rational style appears to engage not only Eliade's reading of a specific text but also Eliade's whole program; some might feel that Smith is critical even of Eliade himself. The precision and force of Smith's criticism may be mistaken for a sharpness of tone. Interestingly, whereas Smith makes his case on the basis of attention to detail and on the criticism of another scholar's work, the resulting impression may be (ironic, it would seem to me) that Smith has more personal involvement in the sense of an ax to grind) than the less formal, less self-conscious style used by Eliade, which masks his creative and constructive operations, thus making them difficult to evaluate in something like self-evident

⁹¹ Admittedly this is my creative interpretation of Sartre developed on hints about a possible "spirit of play" in his discussion of "doing" and "having" (734–65) as contrasted with what he called the "spirit of seriousness" (796). See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956).

knowing. Furthermore, in light of the style of Smith's factually detailed criticism of Eliade, evidence (such as that which I have presented) that suggests that Smith inadequately presented his sources may appear, in comparison to Eliade, disproportionately damaging to the influence of his work.

Eliade's style, when seen in the framework of simulation, is immediately recognized as consistent with his understanding of reality. His style expresses the strength of and confidence in his conviction about the reality and truth of his understanding of religion, expressible both in his generic essentialist terms and in the specific terms of any culture whatsoever. Eliade's style of presentation, uncomplicated by the seemingly qualifying character of theorization and argumentation, capitalizes on the power of the real to devour simulation. Thus, Eliade's style understandably may have a more highly persuasive effect on his readers than Smith's more scientific style. Traditional academic style is facing an increasing challenge from the mounting pervasiveness of the elements of style that accompany simulacra. The generation of reality by the abstract and generic has the effect of appearing self-evident, a condition accomplished because it is self-referential. Indeed, as the territory of modernity, or should I say postmodernity, becomes the hyperrealities of simulation, it seems to me that the academic enterprise, at least as I have characterized it, as being distinguished by interpretation is faced with a potentially fatal threat.

On the one hand, academically explicit styles of presentation are often criticized and may be dismissed by nonacademics out of hand because of their density of argument, self-consciousness, and seemingly endless diversions. Academics, on the other hand, often distinguish the success of an academic work in the terms of standards of style of presentation and dismiss as unacademic works that fail to meet these criteria. Rigid, yet largely tacit, assumptions about academic presentation sorely need to be challenged. I find myself particularly irritated by the implications of the common and rather ubiquitous distinction between "academic" and "creative."

Storytracking as a method of constructing narratives of coherence serves as a perspective or means by which to examine and include elements of style in the evaluation of academic works, as well as other literary subjects. Style contributes powerfully to the achievement of a sense of coherence,⁹² to the advancement of persuasiveness, and to the impact realized by many works.

⁹² For a fuller discussion of coherence see Gill, *Creative Encounters*, 133–34; and chapter 3, "The Ordeal of Incongruity."

Loss of Subject

The comparison of Smith's and Eliade's studies of Australian Aboriginal religions in terms of how these studies represent and are based on actual Australian peoples is revealing. Despite the fact that these scholars represent two of the most influential approaches to the academic study of religion, neither is primarily interested in any Arrernte reality.⁹³ Neither scholar did field study; neither knew the Arrernte language; neither went to Australia. Neither Eliade nor Smith demanded that his published sources or his own interpretations of these sources be evaluated in terms of the extent to which they represent or misrepresent Arrernte realities. Neither consulted archival materials. The published sources on which Eliade depended for his presentation of the Arrernte are highly limited. Smith consulted more sources, but he was far from thorough.

My studies of the same subject show that as a result of academic studies, the real Arrernte are lost, hidden by overpowering academic interests and the overwhelming ideas implicit in the academic theories and methods. I have also shown that the Arrernte is an academic construction, a hyperreality that has to some extent destroyed and engulfed real people.

It is ironic that the only book that attempts a broad academic presentation of Australian Aboriginal religions is Eliade's *Australian Religions*, a book written by a scholar who never visited the country, who spoke none of the languages, who probably never met an Aborigine, who was uncritical of his sources, and who in the final analysis was interested in the Australians largely to demonstrate the reality of his generic understanding of religion. It is doubly ironic—though it demonstrates how efficiently reality devours simulation—that an important cultural example that Eliade presented as representing *ab origine* can be shown to owe its existence to Western and Christian influence as borne by the Lutheran missionaries and others on the Arrernte, as well as to the constructions of the Arrernte by such Western figures as Frank Gillen and Baldwin Spencer. The simulated soon act in accordance with their hyperreality.

Should the seminal studies in many areas in the academic study of religion and other academic disciplines be subjected to the kind of storytracking method presented here, I would not be surprised if it were found that many

⁹³ Of course, neither has this study, despite the attention given to trying to find the Arrernte. I have wanted to rectify the exclusion of the Arrernte by the extensive presentations of ethnography in Gill, *Storytracking*, chapter 6, "The Arrernte."

of these studies have less interest in the subject named than in theoretical and academic issues and with the scholar's own cultural, historical, and even personal needs. It is possible that whole fields of study are made up of floating simulacra, almost wholly self-referential.

It is proposed that academic agenda are unavoidable for all academic studies. The issue is not to rid these perspectives from academic studies but to develop methods, such as storytracking, by which to maintain a clearer and more complete understanding of the extent and character of the influence of these perspectives on the subject studied. Doubtless in the process of gaining self-understanding and understanding of the world, the most common method any community has had available is the comparison of itself with other communities. The comparisons done by the academic community, I propose, are different from those performed by all other communities, perhaps only with respect to a necessary, relentless self-consciousness and by the insistence that the named subject must be required to be the actual subject presented in academic reports.

5

Smith's Golden Bough

Moving toward a Proper Academic Study of Religion

Jonathan Smith, when told of the website ratemyprofessors.com, thought it “an awful idea.” As one who never used electronic devices of any kind, rarely even a typewriter, his comment is not surprising. He tended to equate it with dating sites. He learned this information during a 2008 interview he did for the University of Chicago student newspaper *The Maroon*. Yet he was delighted to learn that his students’ comments appearing on this website revealed their affection for his cane, a heavy gnarly stick with a bend for a handle. It prompted Smith to tell a story.

Well I’ll tell you about this thing because it is botanical. This [referring to his cane] is a rhododendron. It grows from mama, it grows from under the ground, and gets out from underneath mama—that is a parable—and it comes out from underneath. So it’s a natural cane. And what I didn’t know, from the spindly shitty rhododendron that we have around here, that they grow to this length. . . .

My uncle—Freud is the only one who would understand this—my uncle had two hip operations and after they were both successful he turned to making canes as a hobby. I mean, to the rest of us—what is he trying to do? I have no idea. He made this one, in a wonderful phrase that I haven’t heard used properly since the ’60s—he was driving through the Smoky Mountains National Park and he “liberated” it from there. I haven’t heard that usage in—I don’t know how the hell he knew. He used to be a YMCA coach. I don’t know that they talk about liberating things much from a federal property. But he made three or four types of canes, and now I got one, from his wife who’s 95 and said she didn’t think she’ll need a cane much longer, so she gave me the cane he’d given her. It was a little smaller and a

The Proper Study of Religion. Sam Gill, Oxford University Press (2020). © Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197527221.001.0001

little shorter. It's a two-handed job, this one, like so. [He demonstrates.] But the curve of it is funny to grab with one hand.¹

Jonathan Smith had, in his youth, intended to become an agrostologist, a student of grass breeding.² His interest in biology, along with the fact that he'd read *The Golden Bough* before he started high school, documents his life-long interest in classification, taxonomy, Linnaeus, matters of place; and also the wonder of a two-handed rhododendron cane that came to be something of a signature for him, his own golden bough harvested illegally from federal property. It was a fine natural golden color. In botany, the word cane refers to either of two genera of tall, perennial grasses with flexible, woody stalks. Like bamboo (also a grass), once harvested (that is, dead!) rhododendron becomes rigid and remarkably strong. Beyond biology it refers to a mechanical device that aids mobility, that steadies one while walking, or it might well serve as a fashion accessory. Smith's cane served both purposes, yet the fashion statement was perhaps the more important. A cane is a prosthetic, an extension of one's physical body. A cane can be an emblem, an expression of identity.

While my preference in identifying Smith's cane with cane grass (biology) and with a golden bough (à la Frazer) are based on these being associations from the beginnings of his career, they by no means exhaust associations others have made. Wendy Doniger called it a "crazy stick";³ Russell McCutcheon referred to it as a "tree-trunk."⁴ Kimberley Patton put the cane in the context of Smith's critique of Eliade's *axis mundi* as a wobbling pivot, that is, not such a stable center, and she also suggested, invoking an association with his study of the Australian Aborigines, that it was Smith's own "terrestrial-celestial link."⁵ Smith's cane surely has helped inspire some to

¹ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 18–19.

² Smith, "Chips," 2. Notably, in Greek *agros* is "field," "tilled land," so more broadly agrology has to do with soil science. This surely is an interesting grounding for Smith's study of things in place and out of place, with the dirt/soil distinction being a favorite.

³ Peter Grieve, "Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017): The College's Iconoclastic, Beloved, Chainsmoking Dean," *Chicago Maroon*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2018/3/23/jonathan-z-smith-dean-of-college-university-of-chicago/>.

⁴ Russell T. McCutcheon, "Let's Get to Work," "Studying Religion in Culture: Ongoing Discussions at the University of Alabama," December 31, 2018, <https://religion.ua.edu/blog/2017/12/31/lets-get-to-work/>.

⁵ Kimberley Patton, "The Magus: Jonathan Z. Smith and 'the Absolute Wonder of the Human Imagination,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 1 (March 2019): 47–56. Ollivander, we'll remember, ran a wand shop. And, of course, Patton invokes Smith's and Eliade's attention to "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" example as important to their articulation and argumentation for theories of religion. And I think Smith was much more interested in the terrestrial.

identify him as Gandalf and Merlin.⁶ In her touching tribute essay to Smith, Kimberley Patton suggested that as the wizard of comparison (the academic technique) Smith proclaimed himself as *magister ludi* (perhaps also invoking Herman Hesse's great novel) with, of course, his cane serving as his magic wand. Delightfully, Patton chooses Harry Potter (or rather J. K. Rowling) as her source for understanding wizardly wands: "The wand chooses the wizard,' Ollivander tells Harry Potter."⁷ Smith's golden bough, a broken rhododendron branch, had the magic that would have attracted the priests at Nemi and the great Frazer as well. It might well have been interwoven with the exempla on dying and rising kings. This golden bough now attracts our attention as we attempt to comprehend the death of Smith and how we are to continue to follow him.

Frazer's studies of his golden bough set out to resolve the question of why "had the priest of Nemi (Aricia) to slay his predecessor? And why, before doing so, had he to pluck the Golden Bough?"⁸ In this pursuit, Frazer was eventually led to study the dying and rising of kings, sacred murders, the questions of how death is employed to conquer death, and the dying and re-birthing cycles of agricultural cults and practices. As a student of grass, Smith surely found himself on familiar ground in his discovery of Frazer's connection of the dying and rising gods/kings with the dying and rising cycles of agriculture.

Smith's Frazer studies, comparable to Eliade's massive patternist studies, prepared him with vast cultural knowledge and it gave him a kind of experience of everything (he was his own Google and Wikipedia), the sort of knowledge that now almost none of us has.⁹ He engaged the swath of cultural examples that Frazer spent a lifetime accumulating. His concern was both how Frazer read and presented his primary sources—an engagement of map and territory by comparative text source criticism—and also how Frazer sought to organize this whole mess into something orderly and significant—a comparative task establishing taxonomy and classification. Smith asked how Frazer used his sources and what questions (hypotheses) his classification schema sought to address. In his ostensibly technical consideration of

⁶ Brett Colasacco, "How I Failed J. Z. Smith," Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion, University of Chicago Divinity School, January 4, 2018, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/how-i-failed-j-z-smith>.

⁷ Patton, "The Magus."

⁸ Smith "When the Bough Breaks," 208–12.

⁹ Except, of course, in the prosthetic extension to the All we, but not Smith, hold in our hands. See Gill "Thumbelina's Severed Head" essay in *Religion and Technology*.

Frazer, Smith forged the criteria for a proper academic study of culture in an inclusive frame, criteria suitable for religion studies.

Yet Smith's work is not simply technically analytical and objectively descriptive. It is constantly comparative from a variety of perspectives. Most importantly, his comparisons serve hypothetic inference; they generate new hypotheses, new questions. They make connections that stun and surprise. I well recall the first time I read Smith's discussion of the Ainu bear-hunting practices.¹⁰ After describing how complex and detailed were the requirements that a hunter had to meet before killing a bear, he makes the most obvious common-sense observation that should the Ainu hunters actually attempt to meet these requirements, they would surely have starved. He exposes the obvious double-face; they cite essential rules that they (and we, were we to think about it) know full well cannot be precisely followed. This connection, this perspective, generates important parts of his ritual theory. And in the style of Smith, the title of the essay, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," reveals his use of the necessary double-face that I've suggested is the energizing dynamic of comparison and the academic enterprise in its play on the homophone terms "bear" and "bare." In Smith's discussion of a specific cultural practice (bear hunt), he sets forth the articulation of the basic (bare) or stripped-down (fundamental) features of his ritual theory and, in the process, also reflects on what we understand as "fact." Smith's title cleverly illustrates that what sounds identical isn't identical at all, yet it is the identity of things not identical that is a foundational feature of ritual itself. The style of Smith's title reflects and enacts his ritual theory.

It is fitting that Smith found and made connections that inspired questions and conversations among so disparate a collection of cultural examples, surprising hints of the sort of coherence that feels poetic, academic gifts somehow appearing in the midst of our incoherent-laden labors of love, or perhaps labors driven by our obsession or acquired habit. Yet there they are, riddles and jests that provoke the ongoing drive of inquiry dropped like breadcrumbs that are occasionally found by the rest of us.

After a half century living the study of religion, I struggle to comprehend why we do this work. Put personally: why have I done it for so long? More so now that I no longer have to do this work to get paid, I wonder why I can't shut it down. No one is clamoring for my wisdom and knowledge. I don't feel I have some final answers I must race death to get recorded (and hopefully my

¹⁰ Smith, "Bare Facts of Ritual."

bed of death remains still a way off); and I'm not so sure I've had questions, at least the most profound ones, driving my pursuits all these decades. Yet here I am, still driven, even speeding up. I have always felt an urgency about what I do. I've felt plenty of frustration, but also an occasional satisfaction, mostly in the classroom, which I now dearly miss (well, occasionally), but also in the magical process of writing, those occasional moments of feeling the alchemist.

What I've experienced as increasingly frustrating over the last couple of decades is that the academic study of religion seems to have lost much of its core concerns: What is religion? Why do human beings seem so bent on engaging these most strange actions and beliefs? How is it that human beings seem to constantly produce such fantastical imaginings and perceivings? More darkly, why is religion inevitably at the center of most hate and violence and inhumanity, yet we continue to insist that it is everywhere good and kind and loving and friendly? Why despite suffering the strife of difference and threat and persecution are many religious communities still able to be friendly and supportive to others, to those outside their communities? Why has this field of study—so expansive and so obviously important to the current world's problems, to appreciating and understanding the peculiarities and diversity and distinctiveness of being human—tended to atomize into small ingrown groups of specialists whose measure of personal importance is generated by and largely confined to their isolated common specialist (elitist?) work?¹¹ How can a proper study of religion provide widespread influence on appreciating deep divides and seeming insurmountable difference? Why can this study not show us the creativity and importance of difference? Why are religion studies so often isolating and protectionist? These concerns are but a start, and, to me, in the world we live in today they seem so urgent that they must be held in a prominent place among all that we students of religion do. While I've studied the details of a number of cultures, I've always found at the core of my work these most fundamental human questions. Yet I no longer see that these broad human concerns are shared by many of my colleagues. Consequently, I have felt irritated at the isolation of these area studies one from another and their remoteness from the urgent broad human and social concerns about which they seem little interested. These concerns with genus inseparable from species were foremost in

¹¹ I have been baffled that these tiny groups of specialist scholars often appear hostile to anyone outside their closed cadre who might express an interest in their work.

Smith's work, and I fear that he will not be followed as he should be simply because the field has shifted its energies to, in his terms, a primary concern with species while generally ignoring how these studies can contribute to the matters of genus. Smith did not believe that such a study of religion can be maintained.

At the risk of being too programmatic, I will offer for discussion some of the criteria and concerns (principles, perhaps?) I believe essential to a proper academic study of religion. I do not argue that these are directly the views of Smith; they are not. These criteria and principles and strategies are shaped by my own experience and my own work on dancing and movement, on Native Americans and Australian Aboriginals and Africans and dancers and movers all over the world. Yet these concerns are all also shaped by my half century following Jonathan, being in constant discourse with his body of work. Hopefully, these comments will also serve something of a collecting or gathering of what I have discussed in the previous chapters, restatements in different and expanded terms. I hope they will inspire others to keep Smith's work central to the ongoing conversation (maybe also my own), to shift focus to once again include as essential the defining concerns of a proper study of religion, and to set forth my own reflections that might engage valued conversation.

Religion as a Proper Academic Study: Principles and Strategies

Movement

While likely one would think that a discussion of movement¹² as it is relevant to a proper study of religion would be at best a subniche—perhaps a footnote in the discussion of the usual occasional mentions of body¹³—yet I think it

¹² In my work, movement has come to be an overarching and remarkably complex topic, one I have come to consider central and fundamental not only to a proper academic study of religion but also to the remarkable qualities of being human. I plan a much larger and more thorough study that includes not only a fuller development of movement, but also careful discussions of gesture, posture, and prosthesis. What I present here are but introductory remarks. The discussion of movement following depends heavily on my "Moving: The Core of Religion," *Body and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2018): 131–47.

¹³ I've grown weary of the way these body studies are almost always presented. There is often a shallowly veiled sense of apology and embarrassment as though these studies are somehow breaking with protocol and expectation and will surely be criticized or outright dismissed (and they often are). It takes almost no reflection to recognize that almost all of these studies assume (and this is of fundamental importance) that mind, soul, intellect, spirit have unquestioned primacy. This is evident even

must be considered first in that it sets the perspective and fundamental principles that will shape the topics to follow; it establishes a strategy, a dynamic field, for the articulation of a proper academic study of religion.

Foregrounding movement—more precisely, human self-moving—presumes that religion is a human study, that religion is a complex of action and behavior occurring in a material environment that is inseparable from human distinctiveness. To begin here foregrounds the common discourse among biology and philosophy and the humanities; it excludes the view of religion as somehow inseparable from the divine (requiring something like religious or mystical insights) or a study of the sacred other (theology).¹⁴ Movement focuses our attention on an aspect of life that is commonly the very marker of life. Movement joins humans with our animate kin while providing ways of distinguishing us among other members in the family of animate organisms. Moving is utterly quotidian, yet almost unfathomable in the wonder of it, that it is even possible.¹⁵ Thus, to frame the study of religion in the context of moving/movement is to locate it in the quotidian, the ordinary, the everyday, the common biology, while also focusing on the wonder and majesty and glory of what is so often taken for granted. Even when the extraordinary is of interest, movement provides a new and dynamic perspective.

Smith's golden rhododendron bough was a prosthetic of mobility, an implement that transcended his physical limitations to support and enable his mobility in his environment as well as to extend his identity and life force and personality into our hearts.¹⁶

in the term “embody,” meaning “in body,” thus communicating that body is the vessel for the essence or what is “real.” Embody is the study of the vessel, the jar rather than the jam. Over the decades of feeling every time I encounter body studies this deep sense of frustration and irritation, I have had to either shut up and go away or find language and ideas to express a sense of the primacy of wholeness at the outset rather than a wholeness by putting the message in the bottle, the spirit or mind in the body.

¹⁴ I'm coming to appreciate how difficult this shift is for so many students of religion who are gesturally naturalized to equate anything religious to something they term sacred or other (probably should capitalize) or holy or divine or special as just-so. I believe that this difficulty itself is the result of a historical, cultural, psychological, academic set of gestural practices that have made this identity seem natural, ontological, unquestionable. Yet, I firmly hold, as I believe did Smith, that no proper academic study is possible if this identity is in any way—however implicit or tacit—determinative.

¹⁵ I'm not being poetic or hyperbolic here. I do find it profoundly a thing of wonder that we can move ourselves and to do so willfully, intentionally, and with the capacity of the endless possibilities as explored by dancing. Should it be any surprise that dancing is for me the ultimate demonstration of this human wonder?

¹⁶ In the sessions that honored Jonathan at the AAR and NAASR in Denver in November 2018 I heard many scholars tell anecdotes of their meetings and encounters with Jonathan. I was surprised that a large portion of these stories included a mention of his iconic cane. And it is not irrelevant to

Philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's remarkable book *The Primacy of Movement* (1999, rev. ed. 2011) goes far to help us appreciate the inseparability of moving and vitality and moving and human distinctiveness.¹⁷ She points out that we do not learn to move; moving is not something we are capable of doing yet must acquire. Rather, as animate beings, we come to life moving. Prenatally mothers are assured of the aliveness of their unborn babies as they feel them moving in the womb. A stillborn indicates a newborn that does not move; it is a baby born without life. French philosopher Renaud Barbaras, the foremost authority on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, notes insightfully, "It is in living movement that the essence of incarnation resides."¹⁸ While the term "incarnation" shares something of the nature of the word "embody,"¹⁹ which I commonly criticize, it seems to me he is here indicating that the carnate (a living bodied being) is inseparable from self-moving. He also writes, "It is quite intrinsic to movement that it does not and cannot arise from something foreign to it; movement is not a mere contingent modality; it is not possible to enter into a sphere of movement if one is not already in it."²⁰ While this statement is actually obvious, it may take a moment's reflection to fully appreciate. Without anything moving how can moving be initiated?

Yet, throughout our lives, we certainly learn many kinds of movings; Sheets-Johnstone calls them "I cans." The human life cycle is often articulated as a sequence of modes of motility that mark distinct phases in our journey (note the metaphor based on moving) through life—from creeping and crawling to walking and running to doddering and shuffling, to the cessation of moving that marks illness and death ("rest in peace").²¹ There is a primary connection between moving and living; indeed, an identity.

note that it was Jonathan's physical appearance, his remarkable presence, that might well have preceded his words, especially the written ones.

¹⁷ As also does her collection of essays, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Insides and Outsides: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Animate Nature* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2016).

¹⁸ Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 143.

¹⁹ Although isn't it interesting that if we leave off the "in" and its implications of "placing in a body," we end up with a flower! I resist the joke but I do employ the neologism "carnate."

²⁰ Renaud Barbaras, "Life and Exteriority," in John Stewart, Olivier Gapenne, and Ezequiel A. Di Paolo (eds.), *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 105. Merleau-Ponty also made this observation.

²¹ There is a golden age of running that begins quite soon after toddling. It is that period in a child's life when walking seems to them so boring and inefficient. No matter the distance, one must run to cross it. I think it not accidental that this is the same time in life when we surely not only learn the most but also are the most eager to learn any and every thing.

As I have aged and attempted to maintain a movement-active life, I have noticed that many seem to presume that adding years is somehow interlocked with subtracting range and extent of self-moving accompanied by distinctive postural changes.²² Of course, there are factors of the biology of aging, yet what I rarely find referenced is that there may also be cultural and historical expectations that impact this behavior. The extent and character of our movement may be as much based on cultural and historical expectation as on biological factors. Is there a possibility that even biological changes that are marked by reduced movement and postural shifts are the result, at least partially, of cultural and historical expectations?

Shared motility connects us with all animals and creatures; yet modes of motility, often correlating with posture (think quadruped or biped), help distinguish animal groupings (species). I am reminded of my several experiences watching the deer dances of the Yaqui (Yoemem) in Guadalupe, Arizona. The dancers wear a deer head on their own cloth-covered heads. The cloth, usually red, shields their eyes. Typically, there is a large group of observers surrounding the dancer and the musicians, which means that from a distance one sees mostly the deer head with glimpses of part of the dancer's head. The skill of the dancer is in his movement that presents the quality of live deer as experienced in the wild. It is not a precise imitation, but rather a dance emphasizing the kind of movement that includes those remarkable attitudes when the deer holds a posture to listen and look. The dancer captures the quintessential self-movement and posture of deer.

Philosopher Brian Massumi expresses this primacy of movement, adding the remarkable connection of moving with feeling, when he writes as the opening sentences of his 2002 book *Parables for the Virtual*, "When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact it does both at the same time."²³ Massumi is referring to the most basic distinctions of our awareness, our foundational experience, yet the briefest reflection on the observation leads us to realize just how remarkable it is that we can move ourselves, yet perhaps even more astonishing that we also *feel* ourselves moving. How? I'll get to this marvel.

²² I recall while riding on a public bus in New Zealand I noticed a sign that encouraged passengers to yield their seats to the elderly. The sign depicted those silhouette figures common to signs. Elderly was graphically represented as a hunched-over person walking with a cane.

²³ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

Given that self-movement is not possible if one is not already a mover, the language by which to describe and comprehend moving is not obvious. We tend to halt and gridify the actual moving in process to account for it, grasping is halting. Renaud Barbaras explored the energetics of living movement using the terms “desire” and “distance.”²⁴ By desire Barbaras does not denote some lack that can be fulfilled or even an emotion. Desire is how he refers to that living force of moving, of moving on, the thrust of living that manifests in moving. We feel it as vitality, that complex sense of going on while also departing from. Desire indicates a dynamic or tonus or energetics rather than a place. And as desire has a temporal implication, it also has a spatial one, distance. A remarkable, yet obvious, attribute of living movement, as discussed by Brian Massumi,²⁵ is that it is never *in* any place, yet it always implicates the conjunction of places, if virtual ones. Simply put, if we attach moving to any specific place, it ceases to be moving. Moving is the very quality of not being in any place, neither here nor there; yet moving is also bodied, found in a grounding context.²⁶ Moving implicates the living connection of a virtual here with a virtual there. It is always relational, mover in context of moving, here in relation to there. Moving is vectored, directed, valued, and experienced because it invokes this sense of distance, a virtual spatiality. Moving is experienced in terms of felt qualities that are remarkably complex.²⁷ Moving implies a distance before (or perhaps by being a different mode of reality) there is a measurant; moving occurs in a virtual gap. These criteria for the most primary qualities of moving, perhaps help us begin to understand why, in the context of the study of religion, where place terms have been a fundamental means of articulating theory and method and classification and data, movement/moving has the promise to introduce different perspectives, better strategies, ones of relationality, of process, of vitality, capable of new complexities and insights.

Kinesthesia, the feeling of self-moving, is biologically enabled in proprioception (literally, self-perception), the biology that turns moving and touching (nearly synonymous)²⁸ into perception and awareness and

²⁴ Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*.

²⁵ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 5.

²⁶ I love contemplating the whole idea of awareness of moving and how we come to that awareness. I took up this issue in some details in “Orphans of the Sky: Outside, Movement, and Corporeal Concepts,” in my *Religion and Technology*, 123–34. The chapter focuses on Robert Heinlein’s classic 1941 novel *Orphans of the Sky*.

²⁷ The analysis of movement in Rudolf Laban and F. C. Lawrence, *Effort* (London: MacDonald and Evans, 1947), revealed many qualities of movement that can be both felt and observed.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty explored this near synonymy in “The Intertwining—the Chiasm,” in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.

experience and, yes, knowing. These miraculous gifts that distinguish humans among their animate kin imply a “common sense” (in Aristotle’s use of the term rather than Paine’s) or coenaesthesia or the awareness, even a reflective awareness, nearly identified with self-moving, with sentience.²⁹ Our most fundamentally human concerns with life and death would be impossible apart from not only the biologically based kinesthesia, but also and more so the breakover in the human species of having reflective awareness of kinesthesia.³⁰ The fundamental urgency of matters of life and death are not based in abstract concepts or mere ideas; it is a matter of a felt awareness that my real death and my present life are at stake. This concern with the real death was Smith’s revelation of what, at least in part, drove Frazer’s great project. And it might not be too great a leap to suggest that Frazer’s golden bough was a prosthetic that extended his reach, via his highly repetitive gestural movement, into the world far beyond his physical presence.³¹

Movement is the objectification of moving; the verb made noun, action made thing.³² We have become most comfortable comprehending and reckoning moving in terms of movement; the track rather than the traveling; reading maps rather than traveling territories.³³ Math and science tend to be concerned with gridified movement, with traces rather than moving in process. We see movement as captured by a line or trajectory from here to there that in being represented as a fixed object permits the calculation of all sorts of things like speed, acceleration, and lapsed time. Yet clearly as movement, the vitality, the actual moving, has been removed or transduced into a different form or phase of reality.³⁴

Yet, even when we backfill moving as a trajectory across a piece of paper, a route on a map, a journey across a place, an arrow traveling from archer to

²⁹ Various Aristotle’s “common sense” or *aisthesis*, Christian Hübner’s “coenaesthesia,” and Daniel Heller-Roazen’s “inner touch.” Not Glenn Beck’s notion. See Heller-Roazen, *Inner Touch*, 137–52.

³⁰ Kangaroos Don’t Kontemplate Kinesthesia.

³¹ Following this possibility might give a new frame of reference to the distinction of so-called armchair anthropologists and field ethnographers. The distinction is one of class and quality and extent of self-movement.

³² I label this section “movement” as convenient. My interest is more in moving, especially human self-moving, yet I also appreciate that in writing about what cannot be grasped I turn even the moving energetics of my efforts into something static, a printed discourse.

³³ Yet, of course, there is a certain traveling of territories when maps are all we have with which to interact.

³⁴ I believe that there is a moving energetics even of the movement-discouraged sitting scholar suffering kyphosis from hanging head and rounded back in the posture common to reading and writing. As is clear from discussions in previous essays, I believe that the gestural and postural habitations of scholars have a great deal to do with the outcomes, from style to substance.

target,³⁵ an event, we can comprehend that moving involves both a here and there that are at once separate and conjoined. A journey traced as a route on a map clearly has a here (or beginning) and a there (or destination) that are different and separate; otherwise no route, no movement. Yet we can objectively simultaneously see the beginning and end points and all those points in between, no moving.³⁶ The whole process exists at once for us. In movement as on maps, we are *in* all places at the same time, and the dynamics of the vitality are diminished, at least transformed; perhaps a memory experience. In contrast, in moving we experience a common presence of here and there while being *in* neither one. While moving, our *here* is never a full presence because, were it so, we would not be moving, we would be located *here*. While moving, our *there* is a not yet, a destination, the idea of destination, a horizon even, present only as destination not as presence in place. As Erin Manning puts it, “Movement [what I’m calling moving] is qualitative multiplicity . . . becoming toward a potential future that will always remain not-yet.”³⁷ The experience of process, the sense of moving, is framed in the common presence of here and there, yet with the experienced implication of uncertainty or openness or transition. And isn’t it just this uncertainty (the *is* that also *is not*) that is inseparable from the experience of vitality, of life itself? If there is a presence to moving, it is the presence of uncertainty or potential or openness or possibility. Moving is the experience of the impossible copresence or, in Smith’s terms, incongruity or the necessary double-face or the dynamics of riddle or joke.

Yet, we must ask, something so tenuous and nonsubstantial as process, transition, dynamics, energetics is surely either remarkably difficult to study, since we need to grasp something as our subject, or it actually is impossible, mercurial, elusive. Perhaps granting this difficulty as an innovative shift in the field of study (yet calling it anything refutes its advantage) we have no thing to study, no subject that will stay still long enough for us to attend

³⁵ Zeno’s arrow paradox is explained by recognizing that it arises from the conflation of movement (being in place) and moving (being in no place). It foregrounds the character of gridified movement that allows us to hold it in place for analysis, such as dividing the trajectory infinitely. It obfuscates that quality of moving as being in no place, thus not subject to any division at all. It was Henri Bergson who first described the paradox in terms of this conflation. See Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, [1911] 1990).

³⁶ I find it helpful to understand this “representation” of moving in terms of Charles Sander’s Peirce’s theory of signs. The map image is what he called *iconic* in that it allows the whole of process to be represented as present.

³⁷ Erin Manning, *Relationescapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 17.

to. Patience. Perhaps it is enough to have shifted at least our premises and assumptions with strategies; to do so sets things in motion.

Corporeal Concepts, Incorporeal Corporeality, and Transcendence

In recent decades, the study of religion has included, seemingly as a reluctant afterthought or nod, a niche or limited range of concerns that relate to body.³⁸ “Gender,” “lived religion,” “popular religion,” “practice,” “ritual,” and “performance” are but a few of the terms that suggest body. Other terms with misleading implications, like “embody,” are now also commonly used.³⁹ Yet, as we acknowledge the primacy of moving, self-moving, we must realize that both religion and religions are *always already* body. Moving is bodied, yet *to recognize moving body is not a materialist reduction*. To rise to the challenge of appreciating moving, we must take seriously that moving is a becoming as much as it is a being. Self-moving is always a transcending in the most fundamental, even biological, sense. Our biological design has evolved to be highly sophisticated at engaging, responding to, and creating the environment in which we live. Animate organisms at the most fundamental biological level are designed for self-transcendence; to realize themselves through creative encounters.

Humans are distinguished among their animal kin in having a reflective awareness of and a creative response to the experience of this banal

³⁸ I have wanted to contribute to the development of this area of study, seemingly at this point in time peripheral to the study of religion. I’ve published three books in the Studies in Body and Religion Series edited by Richard Carp (Lexington Press) and also contributed an article to the new journal *Body and Religion*. At this point in time it is an ongoing struggle. Several years ago, I had a book manuscript rejected by a major press with the reason given (approximately) that body has nothing to do with religion; religion is an abstract concept.

³⁹ See Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, 310–11, 454, 466–67, 496–97, for her critique of “embody,” “enaction,” and similar terms. She is even more incisive in her “Emotion and Movement: A Beginning Empirical-Phenomenological Analysis of Their Relationship,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6, nos. 11–12 (1999): 259–77, where she writes, “The term ‘embodied’ is a lexical Band-Aid covering a 350-year-old wound generated and kept suppurating by a schizoid metaphysics” (275). The term “enaction” is proposed as the “new paradigm” for cognitive science. See Stewart, Gapenne, and Di Paolo, *Enaction*. It has a significant history of development that correlates closely with the development of cognitive science. Certainly while “action” correlates well with self-movement, the implications of the “enaction” form need to be carefully reconsidered in terms of Sheets-Johnstone’s comments. Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy*, 310, even includes warnings about such compound terms as “lived body” that were introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I fully agree with Sheets-Johnstone and recognize that finding alternatives to the use of such terminology is far more than just clever use of language; it demands a wholly new and innovative approach.

transcendence. Moving, Brian Massumi shows, gives us felt experience of what might be called an “incorporeal corporeality.” As he puts it, “To think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension of *the body*. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct.”⁴⁰ I suggest that the foundation of such common yet squishy terms as “spirituality,” “divine,” and “ethereal” is and can be no other than the extension and implication of human felt banal transcendent experience of quotidian moving. Moving necessarily involves, in Barbaras’s terms, distance, but not a distance that can be physically mastered. This present yet always unattainable future gives rise to the notion of horizon. Horizon experienced in conjunction with what Sheets-Johnstone suggested as our first corporeal concept *in* and the necessary accompanying *out* leads to the imagination and construct of some radical other,⁴¹ itself necessarily a corporeal concept.

Moving offers an alternative to the thorny and persistent problem that arises in the common embracing of body as distinct from mind, soul, spirit, even brain. When we begin with this Cartesian distinction, we can never stitch it back together seamlessly.⁴² This often-popular effort at reuniting never achieves more than a patch job accomplished with hyphen glue or slash paste, a kind of Frankenstein’s creature.⁴³ Moving, as an alternative, cannot be comprehended apart from the copresence of corporeal/incorporeal. Moving is body, undivided, always inseparable from world; yet moving is virtual, incorporeal.

The more important implication of moving as understood by Sheets-Johnstone, Massumi, Barbaras, and others is that the self-moving body has a primacy to the formation of concepts that arise as experienced and felt kinds of knowings.⁴⁴ A host of very common concepts—in/out, before/

⁴⁰ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 5.

⁴¹ I think this process is what Charles Sanders Peirce referred to as “The Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” in C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 6 ([1908] 1965), 452–80.

⁴² I often refer to the impossibility of this strategy with the term “the Humpty principle” because when one begins with the assumption of separation and brokenness, it is impossible to put it seamlessly back together. Better to choose a totally different strategy, which is what I believe moving offers.

⁴³ For a discussion of Mary Shelley’s book and creature see my chapter “Cursed, Cursed Creator! Why Did I Live?,” in *Religion and Technology*, 59–72. I offer another morbid image related to this creature, the postautopsy cadaver. Not only are the stitchings rather obvious, the potential for moving, for life, is also gone.

⁴⁴ Once appreciated, it is difficult to comprehend any concept as purely abstract or intellectual, since all conception is based on living corporeality, that is, the distinctiveness of the human brand of animate organism.

behind, above/below, far/near, left/right, to begin the list—are inseparable from the evolved architecture and gestural mechanics of the human body. Sheets-Johnstone argues that *in* is the first concept that we learn.⁴⁵ Arguably we are not taught the concept *in*; there is not a point in our development when someone explains what *in* means.⁴⁶ Such a concept is inseparable from the experience of being a self-moving human body. I take seriously the implications of the corporeality of concepts. One might initially suggest that all concepts, no matter what the topic or how abstract the subject, ultimately depend on the prior existence of such fundamental conceptual distinctions as in/out, before/behind, above/below. Were such a proposition embraced, that would be a powerful affirmation of the primacy of self-moving body. Yet I prefer to go much further in suggesting that, while certainly there are times in life and particular domains of learning (schools) where we learn abstract concepts in a formal way, even those most powerful, affective, and compelling (and seemingly abstract) concepts are learned through fundamental experience of the self-moving body. I find George Lakoff and Rafael E. Núñez's studies of mathematical concepts, *Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into Being*,⁴⁷ to be convincing. They argued that high-level mathematics comprises concepts that are surely the most abstract and independent of bodied experience, even physical reality.⁴⁸ Yet they show through the careful examination of many examples that there are fundamental bodied experiences essential to even the most abstract of mathematical concepts.

In religious contexts, some of these corporeal concept knowings might be called beliefs. As gesture, self-movement is also essential to the construction and constituency of identity. Showing that moving is essential to perception, Barbaras writes that “the body is this being that exists in the mode of relationship and comes back to itself—constitutes itself on the basis of its entry into exteriority. The body is a temporal or historical unity that creates *itself*

⁴⁵ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, “Thinking in Movement: Further Analysis and Validations,” in Stewart, Gapenne, and Di Paolo, *Enaction*, 165–82.

⁴⁶ The very idea seems ripe for comedy. Just imagine the preschool class with the children gathered in a circle on the floor and the teacher saying, “Okay, children, today is the day we are going to learn about *in*!” Or imagine the parent changing a diaper saying to the infant, “Now sweetie, this would be the perfect time, given the load of poo *in* your diaper that came *out* of your body, to learn a new concept.”

⁴⁷ George Lakoff and Rafael E. Núñez, *Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into Being* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁴⁸ I recall as an undergraduate math major while taking a “modern math” course an assignment to build a mathematical system based on the beginning understanding that a straight line be defined as a line that crosses itself in exactly one point.

against what undoes it through a continual movement toward and within exteriority.⁴⁹ Thus, only self-moving beings have a capacity to perceive (with all the subsequent implications such as knowing) with object awareness.⁵⁰ Yet there is something of the miraculous in the self-transcendent implications of exteriority, of outside. This connection recognizes the primacy of experience, repetition, and a feeling kind of knowing.

Beginning with movement (and, of course, specifically human self-moving), we appreciate that concepts are most fundamentally corporeal, that is, based in self-moving body experiences. Concepts are not simply airy abstract (debodied) ideas that describe or mentally map reality; they are compelling and held as beliefs principally because they are felt by the self-moving body to be just-so.⁵¹ Transcendence is not something that intrudes into human awareness from some sphere beyond body, the spiritual or mystical;⁵² it is an attribute of the genera experience and perception, of the prosthetic extension of the self-moving body beyond its physical limitations in acts of creative encounter. The human imagination of the spiritual and the mystical is possible only as constructs grounded in the most quotidian experiences of perception and self-movement, as an imaginative species of the common

⁴⁹ Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*, 144. There is also the Barbaras comment “Only a being that is originally in touch with exteriority is able to discover what is likely to suit it there,” yet I can’t find the reference.

⁵⁰ I am aware that many are interested in the full range of animate beings—animals—even preferring animals to humans in this range. What an emphasis on moving does is to recognize that humans are among the plethora of animate organisms—animals—while offering some means of making important species distinctions. What I’m suggesting here is that humans, unlike other animals, have the capability to have object-reflective awareness, or, better, awareness of object awareness. Humans perceive objects, as do all animals (even amoebas), yet humans have coenaesthesia (the common sense, in Aristotelian terms), the sense that we have sensory perception. I am thinking of doing something someday like a series of essays to explore these distinctions further using clever titles like “Penguins Don’t Pen Poetry.”

⁵¹ I think it clear that even the conviction regarding scientific theory and explanation is based in feelings that they provide explanation and understanding that feels just-so. Certainly, scientists advance complex, objective, rational data and fact-driven arguments, yet surely the enterprise is fundamentally based on this sense of coherence that is feeling based. Otherwise, in an environment that is 100 percent objective and rational (if we can even imagine such an environment) all reasonable folks would have to agree. Perhaps scientists, all academics, propose that the academy exists in such a world, thus the reasoned basis for argumentation, yet for a history of argument, the ongoingness of competing positions/theories is based on this assumption being a work in progress.

⁵² The word “transcend” is fascinating in that it often implicates the nonmaterial other in some terms of the spectral or mystical or *theos*. The word is rooted in Latin *transcendere*, from *trans-*, “across” plus *scandere*, “climb.” The term is thus deeply rooted in the bodied movement terms of moving across or climbing up. It is fascinating that the transcendent, that which has moved across or climbed up, so often loses body in the process. When Eliade invoked the terminology of hierophany, it was perhaps because he wanted to express the idea of the coming into the body from some wholly other or completely nonmaterial plane. “Transcend” is an appropriate term for a proper academic study of religion so long as its roots to body are not severed.

genus *transcendence*. This corporeal base for the concept of transcendence is evident in the word itself. In the mid-fourteenth century the term indicated to “escape inclusion in; lie beyond the scope of” something. What is escaped, even in the most theological sense of the term, is perhaps rooted in the Latin root *transcendere*, comprised of *trans*, “across, beyond,” and *scandere*, “to climb,” thus “to climb over or beyond, surmount, overstep.” Rather than some independent abstract nonmaterial other that perhaps reveals itself to human beings one way or another, the very word “transcend” is rooted in the corporeal concepts *in/out* (escape inclusion) and the self-moving actions of climbing across or beyond or above, all corporeally based.

A proper academic study of religion must have a bodied, even biological, basis for comprehending such notions as concept, transcendence, and the accompanying human concepts such as spirit, essence, numinous, and *theos*. The corporeality of concepts and the experience of the incorporeal aspects of moving corporeality offer these bases.

Aesthetic of Impossibles: Play, Difference

On the face of it, the common-sense view of it, religions are a strange and fascinating presence in human cultures, not the least having to do with their patent unbelievability, their forte focused on impossibles, paired with the belief and faith being so fundamental that the terms “belief” and “faith” are often synonymous with some religions.⁵³ Certainly, belief and faith tend to lose their force if their object is obvious to all. Those aspects of religions that

⁵³ I don't want this observation to simply go by without considering the full gravity of it. To do so is at the heart of understanding religion, and it is also deeply personal to me, part of the question I now ask with the deepest soberness. Consider economics. It has to do with the practical issues of daily exchange and, while it certainly engages enormously complex and even philosophical issues, it has to do with money and goods and exchange values and cash and credit cards and bank accounts and the stock market. Its relevance, importance, and value are clear to all. The stuff with which it deals may elicit some specialists to build complex and highly abstract theories, yet it still deals with numbers and goods. The segment of reality of the subject of economics is banal and available for all to see without engaging anything parallel to the myths and gods and ritual actions of religion. And so too with political science, anthropology, music, dancing, and all the hard sciences. I recall a physics professor talking about things like neutrinos and pausing to ask how it is that anyone could believe in such things. Still, we do because they are accessible equally to all who pursue them. They don't change based on ethnicity and race and country. The thing I'm attempting to articulate here is that religions seem to have as their forte the most wildly imaginative of human constructs as being at least a part of what comes to be the subject of our studies. I'm choosing to make this not some cloud cuckoo aspect of human life, some strange aberrancy that needs somehow to be developed beyond, but rather interesting precisely because it is so crazy, so laughable. Jonathan typically said, when asked why he chose religion to study, that it made him laugh out loud.

seem so common—myth, ritual, *theos*—are distinguished by the structurality that holds that what is, and is presented as foundational (truth?), is not what we know it to be, at least based on the experience of our daily world. Myths are stories accounting for the gods and their worlding acts of creation in the beginning time (a time before time), the very stories on which truth is defined and evaluated, yet we all know that the time frame is not what we experience every day and how scientists reckon time and the events of cosmic creation; myth time is not Gregorian calendrical time. Yet a proper academic study of religion must not define itself as comprising superior intellect, or having special religious capabilities, that might resolve, or explain (away?) these impossibles, to reconcile the differences among beliefs with some academic theology or some trick of discovering a universal truth tucked beneath the wide variations as manifest among cultures. Apart from its arrogance, isn't this kind of effort simply not so interesting?

Jonathan Smith indicated that his interest in religion rests with what makes him laugh out loud. Asked by Supriya Sinhababu why he chose to study religions, Smith answered, "Because they're funny. They're interesting in and of themselves."⁵⁴ Describing how he selects the data to study Smith said, "Now sometimes, when I break out laughing while reading a text, that is where I want to focus. Because when something surprises me, it also draws my attention."⁵⁵ Laughter and interesting are species of incongruity and incoherence; they are feeling kinds of experienced knowing.

Yet impossible copresents, while being, I suggest, a forte of religions, are not limited to religions. I believe an aesthetic of impossibles is a central distinction that appeared in conjunction with upright posture and opposing thumbs and large brains, in the evolution of humans. Language, art, symbols, and metaphor are based on our *capability to hold together without resolution two things declaring them to be the same, even identical, while at once knowing full well they are not the same at all*. The remarkably complex, coordination dynamics⁵⁶ studies of neurology reveal that metastability (the more technical name for this structurality) not only occurs in creative brain functioning, but is also a fundamental aspect of it. How remarkable it is that the thumb-enabled capacity to grasp an object eventually offers the word that means "to

⁵⁴ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 4.

⁵⁵ Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 49–50. Smith's focus on surprise is given a fuller discussion by Charles Sanders Peirce. See my discussion in "To Risk Meaning Nothing: Charles Sanders Peirce and the Logic of Discovery," in *Creative Encounters*, 197–226.

⁵⁶ See, for example, J. A. Jack Kelso, *Dynamic Patterns: The Self-Organization of Brain and Behavior* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1995). There are many others.

comprehend, to know"; just contemplate the bodily experiential history in which such an identity arose; just consider how natural it is for us to say that we "grasp a concept or idea" when we know full well that our thumbs are not needed, yet the concept is wholly dependent on thumbs.⁵⁷

Among the most prominent, yet overlooked, aspects of these impossible copresents is that we use them constantly without insisting on resolving the tension of the incongruity; indeed, whether we are fully aware or not, it is the ongoingness of the impossibles that is at the core of their power. Unlike binary computing devices that hang up or crash when presented simultaneously with opposing conditions, humans in the most ordinary of fashion thrive on them.⁵⁸ This is why I invoke the phrase *aesthetic of impossibles* as a label.

I choose the term "aesthetic" with reason. While the term is often used in the context of the designation of beauty and art, this sense of the term didn't arise until the late eighteenth century. The Greek root *aisthetikos* means "to perceive by the senses, to feel." Thus, the root sense of aesthetic is more like "I feel, I sense, I perceive, I know."⁵⁹ It is based in body, feeling, sensing, perceiving. There is a body prosthetic aspect to the term in that it applies to the bodied capacities to extend beyond its physical limitations in the encounter with other, with exterior. To link aesthetic with the notion of impossibles is to open for consideration, exploration, and sheer wonder that humans are capable of feeling, sensing, perceiving, and knowing that which, in banal terms, in terms of reason alone, has to be identified as impossibles: mythscapes, deities, or the common identification of terms we know to be fundamentally different as we so commonly do in metaphor and art and language and ritual.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ For a fuller discussion of thumbs, see "Thumbelina's Severed Head" in my *Religion and Technology*.

⁵⁸ I consider the robot/AI encounter with impossible copresents more fully and in a perhaps more engaging way in Part III, "Aesthetic of Impossibles," in *Creative Encounters*.

⁵⁹ "Aesthetic" (n.) 1798, from German *Ästhetisch* (mid-eighteenth century) or French *esthétique* (which is from German), ultimately from Greek *aisthetikos*, "of or for perception by the senses, perceptive," of things, "perceptible," from *aisthanesthai*, "to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel." Popularized in English by translations of Kant and used originally in the classically correct sense "science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception." It became an adjective by 1798: "of or pertaining to sensual perception"; by 1821 as "of or pertaining to appreciation of the beautiful." Thus, aesthetic should be understood as "I feel, I sense, I perceive."

⁶⁰ I've often written about play, as I find it most importantly and profoundly described by Friedrich Schiller in his collection of letters titled *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). His sense of aesthetics is developed in his recognition of the complementary yet opposing drives toward pure sensory experience/feeling and pure abstract form. He argues that these are impossible copresents; they are paired yet they are always in tension. As one becomes more dominant, the other exerts more force. The oscillatory relationship between them gives rise to play and thus to beauty.

I've often felt that the academy is not only stifling, but also dishonest, in its common insistence on answers, on conclusions, on resolving problems, on uncovering meanings. As an undergraduate math major with a physics minor I avoided literature and art because I was devoted to solutions, to proofs, to certainty. I felt that literature was just so much fuzziness and misdirection; what good could something so indeterminate be? Then I read William Faulkner. How naive I was not only about literature, but also science. The drive that motivates one through a whole career, the issues and concerns that shape a field of study for long periods often (always?) are an exercise of an aesthetic of impossibles, of the simultaneous impossibility of final resolution with the drive to seek it nonetheless. Most of us know that the most interesting and revolutionary of hypotheses are those that seem the least obvious, the least resolvable. We are drawn, as Smith said, to what makes us laugh, what surprises us.

A proper academic study of religion must develop questions and inquiries that become increasingly rich through their pursuit, on and on, rather than suffer false halts with the dishonest forcing of seeming conclusions.⁶¹ A proper academic study of religion, as its subject of study, is a practice in an aesthetic of impossibles; the rich embrace of the pursuit of what cannot be fully known, of what is transformed as a result of the transduction from a sensuously rich fleshy reality to the sensory-limited reality of print.

There is the experience of impossibles in self-moving, not insignificant since self-moving is inseparable from vitality. The experience of moving is the experience of process, the dynamic orientation related to both here and there, yet with the full presence of neither. We are never in any place when we move, and every self-moving is an experience of this virtuality, this dynamic of vitality, this most bodied experience of the force of life itself.

Everywhere that I've encountered religions, their attraction to me is linked to what I recognize as their penchant for exaggeration and fictionalization; their practicing an aesthetic of impossibles. While fiction may be said to comprise "lies that tell the truth," we might suggest that religions concoct certain kinds of impossibles while proclaiming them to have an originary, an ontogenetic, an ontological status deserving the capital "T" for their proclamation of truth. Religions unapologetically concoct worlds and times and beings that defy sober reasoned acceptance or common sense.

⁶¹ Ask any undergraduate, and I have done so with a great many of them, if they think the conclusion they state in a paper they wrote was convincing to them. Almost invariably students say, "No, but my professor insisted I have a definitive conclusion."

As I articulated in chapter 4, I spent years researching an Australian Aboriginal example used by Mircea Eliade as one of his principal illustrations for his understanding of religion. It was the story of Numbakulla, who, after creating the Arrente people and their landscape in Central Australia, erected a pole, anointed it with blood, and ascended it into heaven. This story, we'd call it myth, is linked to a second account that Eliade implied was ethnographic rather than mythic. In this story, the aborigines inadvertently broke the pole and so dismayed were they by their loss of connection with their god Numbakulla that they reportedly laid down and died. While my research shows that both stories are almost wholly the concoction of the scholar's imagination, they nonetheless have the aesthetic distinctive of the religious; the practice of an aesthetic of impossibles.⁶²

To offer another more familiar example, we commonly understand the categories human being and divinity or god to be mutually exclusive, each one dependent on its exclusion of the other. Yet we might understand the energetics driving the Christian tradition across two millennia as fueled by the Christ event in which, knowing full well that gods and humans are mutually exclusive categories (and this is the whole point, isn't it?), God is declared to be human, indeed so fully human as to be subject to death. God is not human; human is not God. God is human; human is God. And it goes on: death is life; indeed, eternal life. Poetic chiasms of impossibles. The sensory richness of the Last Supper (with the impossible identities of drink and blood, bread and body) and crucifixion and the empty tomb provide aesthetics—the feeling sensing experience—of the impossible, the human God, God-human, living dead.

I sometimes refer to the structurality of this aesthetic of impossibles by the technical term *metastability*, borrowing it from science largely to demonstrate that it is not rare and unusual or humanities-soft but rather that as a copresence it exists everywhere; I like to say it is as common as dirt.⁶³ Metastability is when each of two or more things depends on a distinction from the other, yet their identity or copresence with one another is not a problem to be solved but rather is the dynamic source of energetics and vitality. Natural language illustrates metastability; the word is both the same

⁶² Gill, *Storytracking*.

⁶³ Mary Douglas and Jonathan Smith showed that dirt is not a phenomenological category but rather a relational one; a valuation based on the copresence of a thing and a place. The term "dirt" then implicates the long history of considerations of place and the dynamics and value dependent on place. Yet I also simply mean to implicate the ubiquity of soil or earth; it is always and everywhere beneath our feet.

and different from its referent. The word *is* its referent; the word *is not* its referent (the word “cat” can’t scratch you). We do not understand the power of language by resolving the impossibility of the copresence of *is* and *is not*, but rather by appreciating how this metastability is the very source of its power. Going further, the force of metaphor is in its metastability; metaphor can be described as understanding something in terms of something else, which we know full well it is not. Metaphor structurality is to say something *is* what we know it *is not*. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Zoltan Kövecses, and others have shown, metaphor underlies the power of language and its structurality is metastability: holding as copresent that something is what we clearly know it is not.⁶⁴

Another aspect of an aesthetic of impossibles is shared with moving; as process, its course may be charted by halting or transducing into event, yet the ongoingness is characterized by the presence of the unpredictable, the creative influence of accident, the presence of true random influences.

The word *nonlinearity* is a technical term that refers to the unpredictable, the unexpected, the surprises, the novelties, the randomness that occurs in any complex self-regulating network from the nervous system to the animate organism to societies including religions. Nonlinearity too is inspired by moving; since moving is not in any place, there is a necessary element of the unexpected and unpredictable in the very essence of moving. Nonlinearities are what laboratories seek to eliminate and what academic theories and definitions seek to normalize and reduce. Yet nonlinearity is an essential part of any system and, in my view, it exists at the core of change and creativity. History and biography and even scientific theory may articulate recognizable patterns, yet our interest in such accounts is always drawn to those occasions where nonlinearity becomes apparent and impactful. In religious contexts nonlinearity is essential to the excitement collecting around free will, fate, destiny, evil, and death. In a 100 percent predictable world, a world absent nonlinearity, none of these terms would have any play at all.

The late physicist Stephen Hawking and others sometimes contemplated a grand theory of everything (GTE), a sort of complex mathematical formula that would calculate the condition of anything at any place and any time including the very invention of the GTE formula itself. Hawking saw this as

⁶⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; and Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphors: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2010).

the end of science.⁶⁵ Given his academic theology of religion, Eliade didn't care much for history because of its relativity and nonlinearity, read also its humanity. His theory of religion was one that identifies with humans and their penchant for making history the presence of nonlinearity, its relativity, its conflict and variance from the perfect world of godly creation.⁶⁶ Eliade seemed to allow creativity only if it is a replication of godly creation; and that seems to pretty much eliminate novelty.

Taking radically the implications of the primacy of moving for a proper study of religion requires that we embrace these notions of *metastability* and *nonlinearity* with the greatest of expectations and interest resulting in, I believe, a richer account of religion and religions. They comprise aspects of an aesthetic of impossibles. Playing out this aesthetic is, I'd suggest, the forte of religions. Exploring them should be the mandate of the study of religion.

Comparison

I believe it is common among religion scholars today to be aware of comparison as an academic technique, yet to feel either that it is to be avoided or that it is irrelevant to their work—or maybe wonder how, if at all, it might be useful. Since I have offered an extensive essay on comparison in chapter 1, I'll but summarize (gather) here as related to self-moving. Comparison is discouraged by the checkered history of the use of comparison in the service to imperialism and proselytization, by certain shortcomings of the examples of comparison by the great patternists and encyclopedists, and even by Smith's common seemingly devastating criticism of examples of comparison in religion scholarship. Yet any proper study of religion must be open to a universal field from which to draw potential data; that is, it must, in principle, include as potentially relevant materials from all cultures and times in human history. In practical terms, a proper academic study of religion cannot avoid comparison. Classification, definition, typology, terminology, data identification, discourse, perception, and advancements to knowledge are shot through with applications of comparison, if often implicit. Anything comprising metaphor, art, ritual, language, symbols, and the like has comparison

⁶⁵ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, [1988] 2011).

⁶⁶ The notion of human making, particularly as it is connected with technology, is at the center of my *Religion and Technology*.

as an implicit and essential dynamic. The very materials that scholars study, existing in media quite different from the actual subjects themselves, exist because of extensive transduction that involves comparison, if tacitly functioning as a technique.

While few scholars should, or likely even could, engage comparison on a large scale, nonetheless religion scholars must recognize that all of their terms, categories, data, and techniques have come to be of value through a history of comparative applications and refinements. The common terms and interests among varying specializations in a proper academic study of religion depend on a comparative enterprise.

Smith, as described in chapter 1, presented a number of writings on comparison as a technique for a proper academic study. The critical understanding of the various modes, classes, styles, and technical requirements for an adequate academic comparison must be essential training for any religion scholar. Smith has provided extensive historical and critical materials to support this training. Even more broadly and importantly, as I attempted to show, Smith's understanding of comparison involves what he called the necessary double-face, the holding at once two things that are both alike (even the same) in some respect, yet also not the same. It is the simultaneous holding of sameness and difference by which comparison—metaphor is a banal example in natural language—expands understanding with seeming endless application. While comparison may be adapted as a technique of limited application leading to specified and inarguable conclusion, its greater value is in its tendency to remain an oscillating playful ongoing relational technique. It is a generator of purposeful movement. Smith engaged comparison in the more limited sense when he examined Frazer's description of a cultural example in light of the source from which Frazer extracted the example. Smith could determine definitively, and often even statistically, Frazer's failures based on this use of comparison. Yet comparative techniques were also used by Smith for the broader concerns of how we comprehend the commonalities, the samenesses, among the seemingly endless, almost overwhelming, diversity, and to do so without the dismissal of difference. Such a technique resists the halt of stating conclusive meaning by encouraging the vitalizing ongoing pursuit of the expanding implications of important issues and concerns.

In the context of the foregrounding of moving as a guide to developing a proper study of religion, comparison when used as a technique for immediate and definitive conclusion engages the backfilling gridifying technique

that brings a halt, if intermediate, to the comparative operation. Comparison applied on the model of the necessary double-face actually functions to advance insight, inquiry, and engagement while fueling the ongoing movement of the process of encounter and inquiry.

Comparison is inseparable from movement. The urge to compare, the necessity to compare, is the desire (Barbaras) that is the life force of self-moving. We live our scholarly work through the moving vehicle of comparison.⁶⁷

Religion/Religions; Genera/Species

The distinction between movement and moving corresponds with Brian Massumi's term *backfill* and Erin Manning's term *territorialize*,⁶⁸ both likely reflecting the influence of Henri Bergson, who wrote of the "retrograde movement of the truth."⁶⁹ Where the term "movement" might refer to a halt

⁶⁷ An explicit programmatic description of comparison as technique might seem to merit presence in the main text of this chapter, yet I think it might here be best developed in a note. In a lecture presented at the University of Umeå, October 8, 2019, titled "What the One Thing Shows Me in the Case of Two Things: Comparison as Essential to a Proper Academic Study of Religion," I developed two modes of comparison. First is *objective limited comparison*, which I consider the workhorse of comparison. This is the comparison Smith used in comparing Frazer's thousands of citations of specific cultural materials to the text that Frazer cited as his source. As I discussed in the chapter on comparison (chapter 1), this is a relatively systematic technique that Smith was able to report in objective terms. This is the technique Smith used in his study "I Am a Parrot (Red)," *History of Religions* 11, no. 4 (1972): 391–413, to determine that the text in question was misquoted. It is the technique Smith used in his study of Eliade's use of the Australian Aboriginal example of "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole." It is the technique of comparison I used to consider the same example in my work *Storytracking*. It is the mode of comparison I taught students by insisting that they "check their sources." Yet this mode of limited objective comparison never exists alone. It is always in service to another mode that I termed *subjective heuristic comparison*. This mode of comparison is what I describe, following Peirce, as a "feeling kind of knowing." It is the mode of comparison initiated by surprise or incongruity or difference or gap that initiates the processes, often tacitly performed and also often in a brief mood of reflection, that might be called hypothetical inference. This "hands-on" subjective and experiential mode of comparison becomes the "third" factor that Smith insists is always present in comparison. That is, it is a hunch or best guess that is often formalized by academic necessity as hypothesis or perspective. The fundamental point here, where moving is emphasized, is that these modes of comparison—objective and subjective, limited and heuristic—are always paired and linked even as they can be analytically separated and actually performed separately. Even as hypothesis arises from subjective heuristic comparison and yields to perhaps extensive applications of limited objective comparison, the results of the latter demand a return to the former for revision and modification and a subsequent iteration. I hold that no issue or concerns worth our time are not fueled by the oscillating, perhaps spiraling movement, of this example of what I've referred to as the necessary double-face. And further, when we reflect on the enormous tedious work of limited objective comparison that fills the lifetimes of most academics, we could not comprehend this as anything other than wasteful were it not for the dynamic and generative energetics of the life-giving movement of the interplay of these modes of comparison.

⁶⁸ Manning, *Relationscapes*, 23.

⁶⁹ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 1–17.

that captures and holds something that its dynamics may be analyzed, in doing so this technique tends to lose the moving. Movement results from a transduction of the energetics of moving itself, moving in process, into trace or mark or text or description or meaning. The gestural and postural skills that identify the academic enterprise tend to discourage moving.⁷⁰ The academy is, in a fundamental sense, the transduction of a moving reality into books and labs, into movement-controlled if not also movement-discouraging environments. The gestural naturalization of movement tends to obfuscate the living, moving vitality of our subjects, diminishing them to mere objects of academic description and analysis.

It seems an important inspiration for students of religion to recognize and to account for the moving/movement distinction. Along with others,⁷¹ I have tended to use the paired terms “religion” and “religions,” distinguished by singular/plural, in the effort to do so. As Jonathan Smith proclaimed some time ago, religion (singular) is the scholar’s invention, yet I would propose that religions (plural) are not.⁷² He was addressing this difference in writing about the data that are associated with religion:

While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study. It is created for the scholar’s analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.⁷³

The data, indeed staggering amounts, reflect the real worlds of folks who have and practice religions (whether identified by them with a generic term or not), yet there is a creative encounter between the scholar who declares that certain sets of data are religious and the universe of possible data. There is no ontological category, no natural set, of data that are religious as such apart from encounter with the scholar. As I have discussed in another chapter, I think there are limitations to this argument (nonacademic folk broadly use

⁷⁰ Our jobs are described as positions, lines, or chairs. Our work is to articulate a position or a stance or a point of view.

⁷¹ Certainly, Braun and McCutcheon as well as Smith.

⁷² In his article “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in Taylor, *Critical Terms*, Jonathan Smith gives the full history of the distinction of the singular and plural uses of the term.

⁷³ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.

the term “religion” as a general label), yet it does support the importance of distinguishing between the scholar’s invention—the genus religion—and the world of behaviors and actions and ideas of folks of differing identities and cultures.

Religion involves the ongoing comparative discourse on and construction of a common category, be it academic or folk. It contributes to the modern liberal concern of the humanities and importantly so. Religions (from this perspective) are, however, the stuff of our discourse that makes it a conversation that is not wholly self-referential and abstract and academic, despite our penchant for this tendency. Religions are essential to religion; yet religion, at least in some technical academic sense, is not essential to and is often totally unknown to and commonly irrelevant to the subjects, the data, the stuff comprising religions. Because a proper academic study of religion is an enterprise of secular humanities and social sciences (perhaps also in some senses, if not now more likely in the future, the natural sciences), it is to be expected that some (all?) religious communities and adherents might consider this proper academic study threatening and perhaps wholly illegitimate.⁷⁴ In my studies of Native American religions I often found that the folks I was studying were negatively disposed to me if I indicated an interest in their religion because in their long experience with this English term it was inseparable from a long history of forces of oppression.

While the distinction religion/religions has long been made, the essential inference from the perspective of moving, which implicates the copresence of both religion and religions, is that we need to appreciate that much of the moving is halted (or shifted into a quite different movement-discouraging intellectual sphere) by academic studies, that we need to develop methods that honor the moving aspect of both religion and religions, and that the very vitality of the academic study of religion is generated in holding as copresent both these terms, however impossible this might seem. I sometimes use the awkward gerund “religioning” to remind that it is the ongoingness of religions (and in a different sense also the study of religion) that is, or I believe should be, most interesting. The extended discussion of the various roles and functions, as well as the confusions, of experience in academic processes

⁷⁴ I remember my late former father-in-law telling me that he liked me a whole lot more when I was religious (which to him meant I went to church with his family) rather than after I started studying religion academically. My book *Mother Earth: An American Story* (1987) received a similar statement from a colleague, who told me that he preferred my Native American studies much more when it seemed I was focused on appreciating Native Americans and their religions, while he found my study of *Mother Earth* to be somehow opposed to them.

are, I believe, a happy complexity that is introduced and foregrounded by a proper study of religion that appreciates the importance of moving.

Defining Religion

Any academic study identifying itself with the term “religion” must, it would seem, offer at least a working definition; surely such a definition is among the fruit of the academic invention. Smith wrote,

Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one’s “situation” so as to have “space” in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate one’s domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one’s existence “matters.” Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation.⁷⁵

When I was a graduate student at Chicago, we spent much time reading and analyzing definitions. At that time my sense was that, even as seemingly unlikely to ever achieve consensus, we were still aiming to come up with a definition. This seems no longer the fashion, yet the enterprise is still occasionally recognized as important.

Thomas Tweed’s 2006 *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* is a book-length effort to do so in the broad sense that a theory of religion offers definition, yet, despite the complexity of his theory/definition, it gravitates toward the core idea that religions “intensify joy and comfort suffering.”⁷⁶ In

⁷⁵ Smith, “Map Is Not Territory,” 290–91.

⁷⁶ Thomas Tweed writes, “Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (*Crossing and Dwelling*, 54). My concerns with this statement are several. It seems to presuppose independent superhuman forces, which, it seems to me, distinguish the category by some ontologically religious data; such a position was warned against by Smith. While Tweed’s definition is consistent with Smith’s notion that religion provides a method by which to create a place in which we might meaningfully dwell, it focuses the factor of meaningfulness on the goal to “intensify joy and confront suffering.” I find this a movement-suppressing and not so interesting way of distinguishing religion, reflecting common contemporary Western folk definitions, rather than a richer academic construct that would be open to religion having as an energizing strength its capacity to create impossible

his *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005) Robert Orsi reflects on the Protestant Christian influence on a broadly held folk understanding summed in the phrase "Religion is good" and suggests this understanding is commonly held by religion scholars as well.⁷⁷ The platitude that religion is good is a popular/folk expression, especially in the context of religious conflict and violence associated with religion. A fascinating conundrum to the popular identity of religion with the good arose in 1978 when, during the national professional meetings of religious organizations in New Orleans, what is now referred to as the Jonestown massacre took place. I well recall watching the news on television as various specialists, none of whom were among those attending the meetings in New Orleans, attempted to come to terms with such a tragic and shocking event that had undeniable religious implications. While many religion scholars attempted to distance themselves from Jonestown by proclaiming this horrible event involved cult activity that was not religious, it was Jonathan Smith who boldly tackled the topic in his 1982 article "The Devil and Mr. Jones,"⁷⁸ which was, Smith noted, the first academic consideration of these events. He clearly recognized that Jonestown presented a major challenge to the very shape of the academic study of religion; the article begins and ends with this framing. What was undeniable to Smith was the relevance of this "religion that seems bad" to a proper academic study. The final sentence in this article reads, "If we do not persist in the quest for intelligibility, there can be no human sciences, let alone . . . any place for the study of religion within them."⁷⁹

What we must recognize from the perspective of an appreciation of moving is that defining religion is a halting activity. To define (at least to

copresents. This aspect of Tweed's definition reflects a romanticism that is not in Smith's understanding. I am also put off by the phrase "intensifying joy and confront suffering." I recall a Navajo story that shows an acceptance of the pain of grief on the occasion of loss. I don't really comprehend how one would think that maximizing joy and minimizing suffering could ever be understood as an appropriate goal for human beings.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of "religion is good" see Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 187–89, which is set in the context of a broader description of the development of the contemporary academic study of religion in the context of American Christianity.

⁷⁸ This article published in 1982 was first delivered as a Woodward Court Lecture at the College of the University of Chicago in 1980. The article is the last chapter in Smith's *Imagining Religion*, contributing something of a bracketing function to the book as reflected in the book's subtitle. Due to Smith's boldness in including murder, suicide, and many things dark as important to the study of religion, the 1978 events at Jonestown have remained a topic of importance to the study of religion. See, for example, David Chidester's *Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

⁷⁹ Smith, "The Devil and Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion*, 120.

arrive at a broadly embraced definition) suggests our work is done, seemingly also that our subject is dead, at least no longer moving. We sometimes qualify the objective of our urge to define as producing a working definition, yet as a qualification it betrays our sense that a final definition is our true goal, that we are progressing in the work leading to a final definition. We tend to prefer *autopsy* to *kinesiology*; a proper study of religion probably needs to reverse this valuation.

I've often contemplated how we might model the use of the term "religion" on our common use of color terms. For a host of reasons (biological, cultural, historical, psychological, environmental) there is no satisfying way to precisely define a color term without ignoring most of what makes color interesting and aesthetic (in both senses of perceived/experienced and found beautiful). Yet we not only use color terms knowing that we are all talking about approximately the same thing, we also find the energetics of the conversation located in the variances and differences and applications and observations. Color terms encourage discourse on variations in style, culture, history, aesthetics, philosophy, and psychology. What delights in such conversations is the appreciation that color terms and the corresponding experiential realities are so interesting precisely because they resist and confound objective grasp and final definition.⁸⁰ It is further of great interest to me that most three-year-old kids are quite comfortable with this fluid dynamic of defining (for them by means of naming) color. They even grasp without protest the nuance of adding "ish" (or equivalents such as "sort of") to color terms. That object is "reddish" or "sort of red." These kids also have no difficulty accepting that a toy that is red in bright light appears to their eye as maroon or even black when the lighting is dim, yet they will still call the toy red in color. In my experience with kids and color, they love asking you your favorite color and telling you which is theirs. How remarkable is this human capacity for color perception and naming!⁸¹ Surely religion scholarship would be advanced should we be able to appreciate that a certain -ishness would follow Smith's recommendation that we not take ourselves so

⁸⁰ Color is a wonderfully rich topic. The biology of sight varies with person and species. Color terminology is believed to impact perceptual capabilities. Colors confound with environment and one another. Color is both objective and subjective, and the experience of color can never be isolated to one or the other.

⁸¹ I recently engaged my four-year-old grandson in an extended and sophisticated conversation on color. He frequently used with confidence the phrase "kind of" connected with colors. He also seemed quite confident in his self-reflection on why we might have such qualifying words as "kind of" given his confident understanding of color categories and how they correlated with perceptions.

seriously. A measure of -ishness in our use of the term “religion” (religionish or sort of religious) might allow us the openness to appreciate variations, surprises, and nuances that a devotion to the totalizing definitive would not.

My sense is that developing a similar strategy for the study of religion—that is, *conversations* and *accounts* honoring differences in style as opposed to halting definitions—opens the study to the moving energetics and vitality that are surely what most attracts us to our studies. Aren't we most fascinated by studying what surprises, what challenges, what seems to defy convention, what makes us laugh out loud? Such a strategy also avoids prickly academic arguments in defense of terms while directing our attention toward religions and religioning, the actual stuff of our interest.

Transduction and the Issue of Data

Jonathan Smith's statement, already quoted, that there are no ontologically religious data correlates with his observation that comparison, at least what is compared, is not natural. I've discussed both of these points in earlier chapters. I want to return to them once again in the terms and techniques I have referred to as *transduction*. The issue also relates to Smith's concluding riddle in “Map Is Not Territory,” in which he claimed that maps are all we have and his lecture “Reading Religion,” in which he indicated that reading, for him, yields cognitive gains, that is, as “a privileged mode of *mediated* rather than *immediate* sight or experience.”⁸² Immediate sight or experience is what I have termed “in the presence of” experience, a direct encounter of the object of study with the full array of one's senses. Mediated, in Smith's use, amounts to focusing on an intermediate constructed form (writing, map, chart, image) that stands between the scholar and his or her subject or, in Smith's case, might be even given higher value than the immediate experience of one's subject.

What I want to attend to by my use of the term “transduction” is that this intermediate form does not have a natural or one-to-one relationship with the objects and reality it mediates. That is, the mediated form does not appear on its own as a part of the given world. It is constructed, and I believe that while this transduction is sometimes acknowledged (especially in the literature of translation), the nature of the gap and the way it is overcome between

⁸² Braun and McCutcheon, *Reading J. Z. Smith*, 121.

subject and media of presentation is given far too little attention, often none at all.

Early in my graduate studies at Chicago I found that my background and experience had ill prepared me for the study of religion, at least in the terms that practically all of my fellow students were electing. As a farm boy from Kansas with education in math and business and a nascent career as a research analyst and computer geek, I had precious little comprehension of the world beyond the American Midwest. In a strategy to somehow engage a study that I might hope to be prepared for, I asked my advisers what they thought about me studying Native Americans. My thinking was that at least I shared something of a landscape with these folks even if not a personal history. I was promptly told that such was impossible because “they have no texts.” That is, they didn’t do their own work of transduction; alternatively, the equivalent of transduction would be necessary for any study at all. Still I forged ahead, perhaps because I had no alternatives and likely also because I didn’t understand the implications of their statement. Walter Capps, who kindly included an article of mine in a collection on Native Americans that was one of my first publications,⁸³ wrote a massive book, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (1995), in which he charted two hundred years of the history of the field. He gave attention to the major questions that had been pursued in the development of the study. He critically summarized the works of the major figures who had contributed to this long history. The heritage was, as he presented it, an intellectual history, a seeming endless series of European and later American intellectuals who wrote extensively about religion. Much of it would rightly be termed theology (more generally, thought); the writings of texts about gods (*theos*). Much of it would fittingly be understood as biblical studies, the study of Jewish and Christian scripture; eventually it expanded to include the sacred texts (or Bible equivalents) of other literate traditions.⁸⁴ Much of it was of the second-order intellectual tradition of reading and writing about others who read and write about some common interest related to religion. In terms of the Christian heritage, this writing would once have been termed “church history” or “theology.”

When I used to teach graduate courses on the history of the field, I had students read Capps’s book giving them a supplemental concern to keep in

⁸³ Sam Gill, “The Shadow of a Vision Yonder,” in Walter H. Capps (ed.), *Seeing with a Native Eye: Contributions to the Study of Native American Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 44–57.

⁸⁴ For example, Friedrich Max Müller editing fifty volumes of translations, *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910).

mind while reading; I asked them to note where in the book they encountered the first reference that could be identified as either a nonwhite (I could alternatively have said "Christian") or a female scholar. The results are obvious, if nonetheless still shocking. Perhaps only long after I'd finished my PhD and had been teaching did I come to fully understand why my advisers had discouraged my studying Native Americans because "they have no texts," and, of course, my own history obviously plays a central role in the writing of this whole series of essays focused on movement and a desire to include, or at least consider, as important the "in the presence of" kind of experience of the subject of study.

I had boldly, if also naively, gone where I was told I should not go, thinking that somehow ethnographic texts, description, constituted the equivalent of what my teachers had meant by text. Indeed, my study of Navajo prayer was based on my location and study of what I referred to as "twenty thousand lines" of prayer "texts," not fully appreciating that, for a culture that historically does not write, the terms "lines" and "texts" made sense only as concocted and placed in the context of Western historical literate conventions. But my dissertation was approved and I went on with my career, if always feeling some dis-ease about this false equivalence.⁸⁵

Capps's account of the making of the discipline in a certain sense raises a question that I believe is a career-long tension in Smith's work. In Capps's account, the massive body of writings and written sacred texts really are data that are inarguably subjects of religion studies. The authors of these texts self-identified as religion writers (or the writings of the self-proclaimed religious), and their writings are unquestionably about religion. The Jewish and Christian literature identified by the term "Bible" are distinctively religious. Capps's book showed that the academic study of religion was well defined in terms of a lineage of religiously interested intellectuals writing largely for an audience of other intellectuals. Smith's description of his approach as being one of reading religion is surely his way of locating himself within this long tradition. And I think it clear that the bulk of the public study of religion today also is firmly and comfortably (meaning without the discomfort of questioning its adequacy and legitimacy) in this lineage. My late good

⁸⁵ Early in my career I had to face this issue in "Nonliterate Traditions and Holy Book: Toward a New Model," in Frederick Denny and Rodney Taylor (eds.), *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective: Studies in Origins, Forms, and Functions* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 224–39. I have to note here that I eventually learned the egregious error of classifying folks in terms of a trait they do not have. We live and learn, hopefully.

friend Del Brown and I had many a heated discussion early in our careers. He considered that religion studies and the study of religious thought were synonymous even though his field was process theology (the branch known as liberation theology having strong ties to politics and social activism). He recognized that such an intellectual activity informed and contributed to his own (and doubtless also to others) search for salvation (his word). He could not understand how my study of Native Americans was legitimate in any sense at all as religion studies since he couldn't see how it might save me; I often lost (better, forfeited) these arguments when Del invoked Alfred North Whitehead, his favorite intellectual. Yet at a later point Del did come to realize that what I was doing might have some value to me and to others, even when I showed little interest in my own salvation.

Smith's early work was focused on Frazer. Frazer's work, while informed clearly by Western intellectual history, shifted, in the tradition of nineteenth-century anthropology, to a global context with heavy emphasis on ethnographic sources to document the specific cultural distinctions of thousands of cultures across the globe, most of which did not write, did not "have texts." The implication is that these "poor" folks without "texts" don't have religions or at least religions worth studying. This inference was not lost on Smith, who noted, after listing the seven "world religions" (those with texts) followed by the category "Primitive" and ending with the category "Others or none," that "more than one fifth of the world's population has just been informed that religiously they have no identity and might as well not exist."⁸⁶ He did not note also that those classified as "Primitive" were another 5 percent, comprising thousands of cultures, each with its own, invariably unwritten, language. Yet of even greater significance is that until very recently only a very small percentage among those identified as adherents of the seven listed world religions could either read or write.⁸⁷

The presence or absence of writing has played a large role in the turf divisions of anthropology/ethnography and the study of religion, in the core (if quite artificial) distinction between literate and nonliterate.⁸⁸ The

⁸⁶ Smith, "Map Is Not Territory," 296. Smith does not offer his source for the list and numbers.

⁸⁷ I must be clear here. I consider writing and reading an action as potentially important as any other. I am in no way attempting to make contentious divisions, as has been commonly done in recent decades between text and practice. Reading and writing is as much a practice as anything else; indeed, this is a core argument (and justification) for my understanding of why we do this strange business of studying religion academically.

⁸⁸ This term "nonliterate" is a precarious and complicated one. I once wrote a book titled *Beyond "The Primitive": The Religions of Nonliterate Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982), attempting to avoid the obvious pejorative implications of that conglomerate of terms which indicates primitivity. Yet, of course, later I came to more fully appreciate that one cannot identify

distinction between cosmogonic text, myth, and folklore was often used to identify the borders between religion studies, anthropology, and folklore. Although even with this division, the association of myth with oral tradition, along with the utter confusion about the relationship of myth and truth, occasionally gave rise to the confounding questions about whether religions such as Christianity actually have myths.⁸⁹

Smith's work, shaped by his extensive studies of Frazer, which included his own acquisition of vast data on cultures, many of which "have no texts," then began to invoke the tension between "reading religion" in the European intellectual tradition and engaging the potential that in the many cultures across the globe descriptions might be relevant to the study of religion. I suggest that it is in the forge heated by these incongruities that Smith began to articulate fundamental principles for a proper academic study of religion.

While Smith wrote extensively on classical topics in this Western intellectual history, he also wrote on the Bororo, the Ainu, the West Ceremese, the Arrernte, and many other cultures unfamiliar and unknown to those in the intellectual heritage (cultures that "had no texts" and thus had to be mediated for Western intellectual access); he was sometimes criticized for doing so. Smith did so in part that the genus religion be properly academic in the sense of being inclusive of all human cultures; that religion be a valued category in the larger enterprise of appreciating the distinctiveness of being human.

If we might hold that a proper academic study of religion in a secular environment be inclusive, that is, be open to the possibility that all or most cultures have practices and behaviors and beliefs that we might want to consider as religious, then a major shift must occur in terms of the heritage that is determined by intellectual data (writing and reading) produced by an often isolated and intellectual few. If, as Smith suggests, the potential data for the study of religion are those determined and specified by the scholar of religion, then there must be some equivalence between these intellectual writings of the scholarly few and the ethnographic writings of the practices and behaviors of the many, the folk. There must also be an openness to what has been largely overlooked even in these traditions that have written texts,

a classification of cultures in negative terms, that is, by traits or media they do not have. I dealt with this thorny issue more fully in "Not by Any Name," in *Creative Encounters, Appreciating Difference*. I use the term "nonliterate" here simply as a convenient, if not legitimate term, in the contest of the preference for texts and writings.

⁸⁹ See for example, Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth: Origin, Logic, and Legacy* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

the actions and behaviors of the folk that comprise the bulk of what at least the folk consider to be religiously important. When I studied ritual, I discovered that most studies of ritual are not of the actual ritual actions themselves, but rather of the texts that describe how ritual should be conducted.

Should we take seriously Justice Clark's insistence that a proper academic study be from a perspective outside of the religions presented, as being in some sense *about* them, then we must ask of both these data sources and types, what are they about? We must realize that in our academic making of religion, the *about*, taken in the most radical sense, must include and be distinguished by a sort of primacy of lifeway, the primacy of the sensory-rich experiential actions and awarenesses that include the actual rituals, behaviors, practices, dances, dramas, and, yes, even the gestural practices of reading and writing while stationed at one's desk. These moving things have primacy such that what we study might be understood as being about them.

Perhaps most radically for those who find religion existing only in the form of writings, mediated or immediate, is the coming to awareness that what might be considered religious about most of the folk who have ever lived has almost nothing to do with writing because until quite recently only the few could read and write, much less consider themselves to be, or even to know, intellectuals. To me there is no little irony in the current convention of referring to these masses with such marginalizing terms as *practical religion*, *living religion*, *folk religion*.

In chapter 3 I introduced the notion of transduction, the transformative operations that convert something of one sensory reality field into something of a different and usually much more restricted sensory reality field. I have spent many a day and night at Hopi watching kachina dances. In sheer sensory terms they are unbelievably rich. There are the smells of Hopi cooking, the plants and animals in the area, the smoke coming from the chimneys, often scented by the burning juniper and piñon. From atop the Hopi mesas there is the vista across the northern Arizona landscape with San Francisco Peaks on the horizon ninety miles away. There are the vast constantly changing colors and characteristics of the high desert. Then close by there is the distinct architecture of the pueblos and the village. From a rooftop one can see the Hopi people in and out of their homes preparing for and awaiting the kachina dancing. When they arrive, the kachinas are adorned with remarkably complex masks and costumes in bright colors. The sounds are subtle and complex as well. There are also the quiet and natural sounds that can be heard

without the industrial sounds of cities: the sounds of Hopi language and laughter, the sonorous and haunting sounds of kachina singing with accompanying rhythm from rattles, bells, and drums. The feelings and tastes have a distinctiveness to Hopi as well. All of this together comprise Hopi; feels Hopi.

The point I'm making here by writing these few sentences is that in writing them I've transduced unbelievably complex fields of sensory perception into but a hint of a full presentation of some specific experience I had at Hopi, a pale description of a few of the major aspects of the sensory field. Yet in my transduced presentation the only sense that is present is limited to the reader's sight, to the words written and reproduced on the printed page. The order of sensory constriction, the demands on this process of transduction, may seem so radical that the whole process is hopeless. Yet as I write these things, as I engage in this transductive act, I can somehow, in some fashion, if diminished, see and hear and smell and taste and feel Hopi, things distinctive to Hopi and their identity and culture. And perhaps so might anyone who has been there or even has experienced long vistas or rich cultural events or ritual dancing or communities with their distinctive smells and tastes. These readers too can somehow experience something of the subject from this crunched impoverished transduction.

I have written of this process as quite magical, on the order of alchemy. It is the alchemy enabled by sensory memory and imagination, if also by poetic description (I wish mine were more so) from careful observation. It is a circulating alchemy that takes the golden bough and turns it into ink and paper, yet it also is the remarkable alchemy that allows the golden tree to grow and bloom once again in the ordinary act of reading about it. Frankly, I believe that the reason I cannot stop writing, why I have always been so excited by writing, is because in doing so I become the alchemist, or his apprentice, and experience making this magic.

I think the complexities and possibilities raised by the awareness of the operations of transduction are among the most important and fascinating, yet almost totally ignored, issues in building a proper academic study of religion. This is the issue raised by Smith in proclaiming, "Map is all we have."

What I'd like to suggest is that the form of almost all the data of our studies, however we determine which are relevant, are the product of transduction. If the long heritage of the study—of our subject, our data set—is limited to intellectual thought, then the writings are the transduction from thought to writing. If our data are the sensory-rich behaviors that include objects and actions, then the written descriptions are also transductions from action to

description. Walter Ong, Marshal McLuhan, Jack Goody, even J. L. Austin,⁹⁰ wrote extensively and convincingly about the differences between orality and literacy, about the importance of medium to message.

The point is that our data are almost always the product of a radical transduction that can't help but reshape, even shift the ontological character of, our subject, of what our studies are about. What we lose when we fail to recognize and appreciate the effects of transduction is the richness of human experience in the full registers of the senses, movement, action, behavior, and vitality.

The "End" of Religion Studies

Kimberley Patton and Benjamin Ray's 2000 edited volume *A Magic Still Dwells* is a collection that develops from Jonathan Smith's (1982) essay on comparison "In Comparison a Magic Dwells" and, of course, his extended writing on comparison. The volume not only reprints Smith's essay, it also concludes with an essay by him titled "The 'End' of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification."⁹¹ As is so common to Smith's titles, this one poses a riddle, after his fashion. By putting the word "end" in quotation marks, Smith calls attention to the multiple meanings the word might suggest. As he so often criticized the comparisons of so many others, one sense of the word "end" might be that he is proclaiming, against the obvious premise of this collection, that comparison should come to an end. Be done with comparison, damn it! I've heard scholars state that they believe this was Smith's intent. Yet he might also be intending to draw our attention to his wisdom about why we should compare, what we should be getting out of it, to what end (benefits and achievements) practicing comparison promises to lead us. This riddle presents the necessary

⁹⁰ See, for example, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 3rd ed., 2012); Marshal McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message* (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2001); Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), among others.

⁹¹ Professor Patton told me that Jonathan was reluctant to write this essay. It is brief, and Jonathan's style includes putting out provocative work while refusing to attempt to resolve its ambiguities and riddles. Writing this little essay for Smith is something on the order of the response William Faulkner gave to an audience question following a lecture at the University of Virginia. "Mr. Faulkner why did you write *The Sound and the Fury*?" Faulkner answered: "Oh, I had an image in mind of a little girl climbing a tree with dirty drawers." I'm grateful that Professor Patton cajoled Jonathan into writing this essay precisely because it extends the riddle of "ends." It also reminds me of how much I dislike questions to artists and scholars such as, "So what were you really trying to say?" or "What did you mean when you wrote this article?"

double-face that I have argued was common to Smith's work and the core idea in his understanding of comparison. Smith's riddle related to comparison serves to keep open and in question what we religion scholars/teachers do and why we do it, taking seriously the possibility of the very end of the enterprise of religion studies. We must always ask why we are doing what we do. Can there even be a proper academic study of religion? Is it of value? Is it legitimate? Does it serve anything beyond our assortment of tiny intellectual cohorts? Does it do harm? Is it but a disguised imperialist strategy or a subtle method of proselytization? Is doing it worth what we get paid? None of these are questions with final answers, yet they are questions we must never fail to ask.

To what end should a proper academic study of religion be directed? In this chapter the emphasis on moving and an aesthetic of impossibles encourages process, openness, ongoingness, the persistence of a process of negotiation, revision, application, and reconsideration, as a way to envision our subject both in the religions of others and also in the inventive process of religion scholarship. As a certain phase of moving and mapping we attempt to halt things, a momentary effort to control the moving that we might grasp as whole the journey, the system, the dynamics. Constructing maps by academics is writing books and articles *about* our subjects, perhaps complemented with the creation of other fixed media such as diagrams, tables, and photographs. I stress that both the academic (and folk) sphere of constructing religion and the sphere of the practice and action of religions in culture and history have phases, or aspects, of moving (where there is no place because it is moving) and movement (where halting forms are created for just the purpose of their stopping the dynamic, if momentarily). It was a persistent insight of Smith to recognize this commonality between religion and religions, between the academic study of religion(s) and their actual practice. The rarely considered implication is the possibility that the *ends* of each, religion and religions, are not entirely or necessarily different.

As Smith and others have articulated what might be recognized as relevant to the end to which our efforts are directed, they have commonly invoked the term "place." For decades students of religion have sought a firm place on which to stand, evident, for example, in Smith's book *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (1987), Smith's article "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand" (1970), and Tony Swain's book *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (1996).⁹² This

⁹² Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). There are many articles by Smith that articulate the importance of place.

attention to place has sometimes taken on the proclamation that there is some proper place, the assumption of a particular theory or definition or approach, for example. Eliade articulated his construction of religion in terms of a fixed center (to be slightly redundant) and an originating time. Smith credits Eliade with teaching that “to ask the character of the place on which one stands is the fundamental question for the study of religion.”⁹³ Eliade understood in largely negative terms the ongoingness, the moving of religions, the history of religions, the metastable nonlinear (or relativist) aspects of religions that inevitably arise over time. He imagined ritual as the antidote to history allowing a cyclic return (eternally) to the purity of the original firm place. For Eliade religion offered fixed places—principles, rules, ideas, deities that offered a firm foundation and a stable world—and moving was acceptable only within or modeled on this fixedness or as some sort of return or renewal to those founding times and places. Eliade’s categories of the fixedness of place were articulated simply as beginnings (mythic time before human time) and centers (the world axis typically the paradigm for the connection of heaven and earth). It is fascinating to me that in Eliade’s system it is the gods who fixed (placed) things, as it is the humans who seem always to be moving. In his use of the Numbakulla Aboriginal example, Eliade understood that the loss of their fixed place—represented by the broken pole—simply made life impossible for them. The pole (as Eliade concocted it) was their god’s way of fixing orientation and also the conduit connecting the god with humanity; without the pole the Arrernte were destined to wander, a fate so intolerable that they, in Eliade’s account, simply lay down and died.

Yet Smith, Eliade’s colleague, recognized something of the dynamics of place. He brought our attention to the mapping, to even religions as mappings, that directs our attention to the issues of fit/coherence; a favored term being “incongruity.” Yet, despite this awareness of a fundamental dynamics, Smith sought place, even if place had no ontological status beyond the proclamation of one’s present interests and inclinations. He recognized that the choice of a place on which to stand largely determines the outcome of the succeeding academic process; religions too. Scholars have argued for definitions or grounding theories or a selected discipline or a fixed medium or a specified topic on which they might stand, recognizing that the firmness

⁹³ Smith, “The Wobbling Pivot,” 189.

of stance, place, is fundamental in determining outcomes, in producing defensible and definitive results. The study of religion has become gesturally naturalized to articulating its distinctiveness in terms of place. While it is perhaps no longer done in the theological style of Eliade or obvious religious stances, the articulation of place nonetheless occurs in the narrow devotion to the expertise on, some privileged place of, a specific religion, era, figure, event, perspective, medium, issue, problem. Without the serious common and comparative academic discourse on religion, the study of religion gravitates toward a loosely related collection, with each subfield designated largely by geography, historical specificity, or subspecialty. Scholars are standing firm in all sorts of places with little interest in raising among them any common concern or contention, and without acknowledging the importance of any common discourse.⁹⁴

Smith often cited the dictum of Archimedes, "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world." While it is possible that the statement was made as evidence of the multiplying force of levers, Smith used it to demonstrate the importance of finding a place on which to stand, that is, carefully constructing and selecting one's theory. I'm suggesting that there is another element of Archimedes's statement that might also be of interest, perhaps an even greater one. An alternative understanding would suggest Archimedes's concern is with agency, the potential for power. To move, as in to "move the world," marks the agency and power of making, doing, creating, acting, living. Archimedes's attention might be read as moving beyond place.

Smith offered a definition of religion in which meaning holds a fundamental place. It is worth quoting again.

History is the framework within whose perimeter those human expressions, activities and intentionalities that we call "religious" occur. Religion is the quest, within the bound of the human, historical condition, for the power

⁹⁴ Despite important critiques such as Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) the study of religion remains largely one of studies defined and articulated by place designation: East/West, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Native American, European, Indigenous, Latin American, borderlands. The designation of specific world religions as singular (e.g., Christianity) rather than plural (e.g., Christianities) I suspect is due to a strong identity of religion with place. It is without contest that religions, being historical and cultural, are always located geographically, yet even the discussion of religion and movement is often one confined to the dynamics of place. An example of this understanding of movement is Thomas Tweed's discussion in his *Crossing and Dwelling*. The proposition I'm making is that to understand religion in terms of moving, place is made and negotiated as a dynamic of religion rather than a given that delimits one's area of study. Moving (kinesiology) is primary, rather than place (autopsy).

to manipulate and negotiate one's "situation" so as to have "space" in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate one's domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one's existence "matters." Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation.⁹⁵

Restating, if too hastily: religion is the quest for the power to make a place where one's life is filled with meaning. Meaning is not only the scholarly measure of religion (the end to which it strives), it is also a common folk reference to life's goals, religious or not. We so often say we are searching for or have happily found meaning. Given our foregrounding of natural language as the most common focus of gauging and articulating value, meaning seems rather natural. We look up the meanings of words that we might communicate effectively. In academic contexts from an early age we are taught to find and articulate meaning as the goal of our tasks of interpretation and understanding. Meaning is roughly equivalent to answers, reminding us of Smith's "No Answers, No Questions" study of Frazer. In corporeal conceptual terms we search for meaning *in* and meaning *behind* and meaning *of* whatever is our object of concern. Meaning seems elusive and hidden and the object of quest. Religion, in these terms, is a bit like a player in the game "hide and seek"; the study of religion even more so. To find or create meaning is, in Smith's terms, something that *matters*.

In Smith's definitional statement, I've always felt that its most direct and straightforward articulation is rather vague on what is religious about this quest for power and meaning. Might a good job, or a healthy body, or a peaceful or exciting relationship, or a supportive community, or a new car do the same without any of the usual associations with religion?⁹⁶ Smith's continuing refinements and developments in the sentences that follow, in this definition, focus a bit more on how we might see some things as particularly religious. Yet, it seems the articulation that distinguishes the religiousness of the data remains imprecise.

⁹⁵ Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 291.

⁹⁶ Indeed, movements like "The Secret" turn material desires, including a new car, into a religious action.

Likely it is my decades of dancing and moving that have contributed to my growing impatience with meaning, our quest for it, and our articulation of it. In one of my very first publications⁹⁷ I found myself struggling with this issue as it arose for me at Hopi. I spent several days atop a pueblo house in Hottevilla at Hopi watching the dancings and rituals of kachinas. The sensory richness, the complexity of the costumes, the mesmerizing quality of the singing and dance rhythms, the endless styles of interactions among the Hopis, the unspoken implications of a vast history of story and tradition, the implications of gender and age, the obvious complexity of secret societies, the traditions of masking and costuming, the huge variety of kachinas each with stories songs and rhythms, the calendrical implications, the presence of clowns . . . all these things were glorious, marvelous to behold, complex beyond comprehension, a *mélange* of sensory delights. And it was abundantly clear to me that what I could observe was but a tiny fraction of the richness surrounding these events, a richness the knowledge of which was held by various Hopi organizations, each one secret from the others. How was I to *grasp* all this? As I was leaving, I turned to a Hopi man who had stood near me most of the day and asked him a question that even I knew was ridiculous, "So what does this all mean?" His response came quickly, and he seemed to think I'd find it adequate (I've always wondered why). He said, "We dance for rain."

But then this kind of response seems common to the whole field of dance writing. How does one transduce the complexities of movement, with all the accompanying multisensory elements few if any of which involve the use of natural language, into a statement of meaning? How does one give place (meaning, grasping, explaining) to what is primarily moving when the very distinction of moving, as I've noted, is being in no place? I take my granddaughters to *The Nutcracker* ballet every year. What would I say if one of them asked, "So what does it mean?" One might suggest that the very notion of *en pointe* in ballet is a sort of reminder of the magic of balance (a sense of being joined with place) as always paired with the flow of self-movement (a sense of transcending being in place) and that the art and power of ballet is in this interplay.⁹⁸ As Smith along with Frazer knew, with reference to things

⁹⁷ I've lost track of this reference but it was an editorial introduction to an issue of *Parabola* in its earliest years and might have been titled "We Dance for Rain."

⁹⁸ At the risk of overkill I have the urge to say more. In ballet those moments when a ballerina balances *en pointe*, seemingly still (without moving), is commonly awarded by audience applause. The secret, known to us all, of balance in ballet is the force of moving. Like riding a bicycle, we can maintain balance through the forward movement. From a biological perspective, the *en pointe* balance of a ballerina involves an internalization of the dynamics of moving. It is the trained tonus among a riot

that matter most, there are no answers because there are no questions (at least none with any hope of being paired with a satisfying answer). This is the wisdom of the deathbed story (riddle?) of Gertrude Stein. This is Smith's insight on Frazer's concern with death.

All such efforts to articulate meaning as a way of responding to such profound and complex matters and to do so in a way that fully demonstrates why something matters to me feel insulting to the subject; I think they constitute a forced, false closure that no amount of academic effort would justify.⁹⁹ I don't believe that this frustration is limited to dancing and death; surely it applies to all things that turn out to matter enough to engage as one's life's work or for that matter even what we do any hour. For a while, and still occasionally, I attempted to make the distinction between meaning and the meaningful. Smith uses the term "meaningfully dwell" in his definition. The distinction, as I try to articulate it, has to do with a halt versus an ongoing process. To resolve that something matters because it holds a particular meaning tends to halt and limit the process, close it to future possibilities. The meaning replaces the subject. The power has been obtained; the goal is won; we're done. Next! Yet I have attempted to imagine that an academic study might focus on the processes by which the quest is undertaken, the various ways that power is exercised, the range of factors that amounts to the experience of something mattering. In this distinction, meaning nails down, grasps, and halts; meaningful ebbs and flows, maybe even overflows with an ongoingness that is dynamic and full of surprises, enriching and enlarging over time. A crude distinction, yet initiating a valued consideration.

Throughout his career Smith was never far from exploring his interests in jokes, jests, riddles, incongruities, play, and difference (all terms he commonly used) and the exercise of a personal style that incorporated these dynamics in many creative ways. He preferred questions to answers; the impossibles to things obvious; or the obvious that others tend to overlook. In following Smith, one of our tasks is, I believe, to invent ways in which we can advance these inspirations into academic perspectives and techniques. My

of opposing muscles proprioceptively sensed and maintained. Balance is the internal evidence of the necessity of self-moving. A demonstration of the dynamics of moving, the ongoingness of moving, through the impossible copresence of the appearance of not moving.

⁹⁹ Consider the efforts of Susan Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), to expound on how one might write about dancing. There is a small field of dance writers who persistently struggle with the issue of transducing the moving dynamics of dancing to the fixed printed words.

efforts to follow Smith have moved toward the consideration of the nature of coherence and the impossible copresence of coherence with incoherence.

The copresence *coherence/incoherence* is, as I have come to realize, preferable, at least for me, to *meaning*. Coherence is a felt energetic, inseparable from moving, that has temporal and spatial implications. The term has to do with fit, yet the older Latin root indicates also hesitation. This root suggesting that uneasiness or concern is a clue that coherence is necessarily copresent with incoherence. Coherence is not a rational or logical condition objectively determined. Coherence is the felt knowing of relief, the relief of fit or rightness, if temporary, from the ubiquitous threat of looming chaos, incoherence. It is experiential, subjective, temporary, yet it occurs in contexts that can be described and appreciated.

I suggest that our most fundamental experience that serves as the model for recognizing the feeling of coherence, a feeling kind of knowing, is our experience that skilled or highly repeated movement feels smooth and natural and easy; *sprezzatura*, as the Italians might term it. While the terms “fit” and “rightness” seem especially squishy, they are not without scientific support. Decades studying human movement led Nikolai Bernstein, Russian physiologist,¹⁰⁰ and more recently Daniel Stern¹⁰¹ and Alain Berthoz¹⁰² to appreciate that there are specific ranges and smooth patterns of movement associated with common habitual trajectories enabled as well as restricted by human physiology. For example, the movement path of the trajectory of the arm moving to transport food from a surface to one's mouth occurs within a narrow range of possibilities. It is a smooth movement that accomplishes a quotidian banal task. Jerkiness or the failure to deliver food directly and efficiently to the mouth—as in missing one's mouth and stabbing oneself with a fork or turning a spoon to drop food in one's lap—often indicates pathology. So too with walking. Certainly, it is common that cultures, genders, age sets, abilities, postures, and many other variables are at play in the formation of different kinds of walking; each nonetheless over time and extensive repetition comes to feel naturally smooth to the one moving. Jerky movement is

¹⁰⁰ Nikolai Bernstein, “On Dexterity and Its Development,” in Mark L. Latash and Michael T. Turvey (eds.), *Dexterity and Its Development* (New York: Routledge, 1996). See also Josef M. Feigenberg, *Nikolai Bernstein: From Reflex to the Model of the Future* (Berlin: LIT, [2004] 2014).

¹⁰¹ Daniel Stern, *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology and the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁰² Alain Berthoz, *The Brain's Sense of Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

experienced as cause for concern.¹⁰³ Recently, when a physician asked me if I'd had any falls, I assumed this to be an agnostic statement and I, perhaps a bit haughtily, asked her at what age of their patients do physicians start asking that question. She informed me they ask it of all patients because unexplained falls often signal a range of possible pathologies.¹⁰⁴ It is our long experience with self-moving, I argue, as subjective as it is, that provides the experiential measurant or model for feelings of coherence, fit, rightness. There is nothing natural or rational or ontological about the feeling of coherence, of fit, and this is the wonder of it; despite not being rational, it feels just-so. Yet I suggest that it is the normal repetitive practice of simple human movement experienced as smooth, as right, that provides the feeling foundation for all assessments of coherence/incoherence. Coherence/incoherence is a feeling kind of bodied knowing. While coherence/incoherence is based in body experience, it offers the corporeal basis for abstracted concepts.

The great advantage for understanding that coherence is not objectively or rationally determined, yet is based in bodied experience distinctive to human biology, is that it offers the appreciation of differences from person to person, culture to culture, in what is considered and experienced as coherent or incoherent, without difference being something completely alien. We may appreciate that what seems just-so, utterly natural, even rational, to us, may be experienced by others as the complete opposite. I suggest that cultural, historical, and personal gestural practices provide varying parameters for coherence. This insight, not available to an objective of stating value in terms of meaning, is remarkably important in enabling us to recognize that difference and otherness can be comprehended and appreciated.

Based on the inspiration that moving has primacy, our attention should be on matters related to gesture, posture, prosthesis, which, taken together in complex pairs as well as a complex triadic dynamic, comprise a nexus. It is possible to discern and articulate the context comprising habits of moving that provide the measurant of the coherence/incoherence gradient. This approach directs us to the skills that cultural and religious traditions give folks

¹⁰³ I've hiked a good deal in terrain that is uneven and often characterized by unstable conditions. So often when hiking I have been obsessed with the marvel that, as we trek along, we are able to navigate obstacles, assess the stability of what we step on, and still chat with a companion. We rarely stumble. It is, for the most part, a smooth and nearly automatic experience, even if physically difficult. Then consider the trail runner who smoothly negotiates these routes at much higher speeds. This quotidian biological marvel is, I believe, the foundational experience for coherence.

¹⁰⁴ I recently read that among all the ways one might measure the potential for longevity is the pace of walking. See Wendy Bumgardner, "How Fast You Walk May Predict Your Lifespan," *Very Well Fit*, April 2019, <https://www.verywellfit.com/how-fast-you-walk-may-predict-your-lifespan-4150312>.

to creatively navigate the complexities of life experience. In attending to gesture, posture, prosthesis we appreciate repetition, practice, accumulations of experience, and our evolved biology. We appreciate the experience of ordinary religious practice as important and valued every bit as much as (maybe more than) the so-called peak experiences we have so commonly exclusively identified as religious experience. In his 2010 lecture “‘Now You See It Now You Won’t’: Religious Studies over the Next Forty Years,” Jonathan Smith included gestural studies as one among five trends he expected would emerge.

As we go forward we must be careful not to identify moving with some peripheral niche locations where we place body and performance and practice. The focus on moving should relocate what have been considered lesser concerns as deserving much greater consideration. For example, we must recognize that reading and writing texts are also essentially bodied, performance, practice, gestured, postured, and have their own prosthetic reach, if somewhat limited.¹⁰⁵ Yet, more than greater attention, we must embrace what is surely obvious: religions as well as the study of religion are always already body, through and through.

The appreciation of implications of Smith using quotation marks to set off word “end” is his experiential nudging of us toward an insight. The “end” of the study of religion is always bound in the oscillating movement engendering unending concerns of it simply ceasing as unworthy of public pursuit and our mistaken sense that our work is directed toward achieving some final attainable goals such as the articulation of meaning or truth or interpretation or translation. The very raising the questions of “end” is its own refutation, as it should be.

Moving and Materialism

Smith’s statement, shocking to many scholars at the time and since, that there are no ontologically religious data shifts the identification of the materials that we are concerned with when we study religion to a consideration of the human encounter with matter as fundamental. Of course, there are behaviors and actions that might be designated as religious as well, yet how are they

¹⁰⁵ We’ve wasted much of a generation on the struggle for what we have thought to be conflict between text and practice, an issue that wouldn’t even arise if we allowed in a radical way the primacy of moving.

data apart from some material presence? I think some materialist studies of religion focus on physical features—inscriptions, location, proximity to other objects, iconic depictions—as the principal means to read these objects like religious texts.¹⁰⁶ I don't disparage these studies at all, yet I am eager to expand the scope of what is implicated by matter.

For many years I have been interested in the human senses and engaging more directly and fully the implications of our sensory human capabilities. For me it all started with color. Isn't it endlessly fascinating that color perception and naming is a complex affair that involves, necessarily, biology (the very construction of the human eye and the full neurology that the eye is a terminal to); culture, history, and language; individual psychology and taste, even health and acumen; skill and practice that changes color vision over time; and context (colors change based on what they are in proximity to and the light conditions—the brightness confound)? Color is always biological and subjective; color is always objective and of the physics of light. As I explored color I began to realize that it is impossible to isolate the sight capabilities related to color from other human senses. Color vision, as other sensory capabilities, is synesthetic. We even name colors based on objects that have taste and smell and touch components as strong as, and inseparable from, vision. Orange is a distinctive color, yet the term names a citrus fruit with powerful sensory components beyond what we gain by sight. The fruit becomes the multisensory paradigm for the color. Reading and teaching on the topic “religion and the senses” regularly over many years led predictably to the familiar distinction I have explored extensively in this chapter: movement versus moving. Human senses may be considered in rather objectivist and passive terms, yet also delightfully in active terms, in agentic terms of self-moving. Examples are seeing versus looking or examining or searching; hearing versus listening; touching versus feeling; tasting versus savoring. In the biological terms of proprioception, the active/passive distinction is one of more or less responsiveness to encounter, in physical contrast with the attentive, directed, active, agentic exploration of encounter. Passive versus active. Both involve the active senses. Both involve moving. Yet the pairings arrange themselves on a continuum that highlights important and distinctive aspects of all, but particularly human, sensory perception. Renaud Barbaras has shown that perception involves living movement (what

¹⁰⁶ Lawrence Sullivan suggested this notion some time ago, suggesting that a canoe be read as a text. See “Body Works: Knowledge of the Body in the Study of Religion,” *History of Religions* 30 (1990): 86–99.

I call self-moving), yet so too the most quotidian aspects of perception and knowing are fundamentally a matter (ahem!) of the bodily encounter with the material environment.

While some neuroscientists, and quite a few others, place agency as being initiated in the brain—I think immediately of the widely cited Benjamin Libet experiments that so many cite as scientific support rejecting free will.¹⁰⁷ Yet the basic alternative that Libet's work is often cited to support—that is, that “my brain made me do it”—is actually a pretty crazy and untenable notion.¹⁰⁸ Apart from being integral to a moving body, the brain would be several pounds of useless tissue. Even its autonomic functions would be useless. And apart from the material sensory encounter with environment, the thought functions we often identify as mind would be without content.

I am not suggesting anything like a materialist reductionism, that religion and human behavior are adequately understood and explained on the basis of the needs of bodily metabolism (as Hans Jonas argued)¹⁰⁹ or the need for calories.¹¹⁰ Rather, my fascination has always been with the appreciation of a materialist (or better biological) expansionism, that our sensory self-moving human biology enables (and necessitates) the richest of existence situated in a physical environment yet opens to the limitless invention of idea and imagination.

All religion is materialist in this sense, as are all things human. The challenge for a tradition of study in which the subject is largely thought to be understood almost totally in terms of nonmaterial abstractness is how we might recover what is most obvious, that is, that we exist as material beings in a material world.

André Leroi-Gourhan was a paleoethnographer notable for his research on spearpoints and other tools in early human history. His work is distinguished by his realization that the object alone was not adequate to speak of its full human importance and value. His approach placed the material object in the hands, literally, of its users, asking what gestural patterns and behaviors were involved in their use of these objects. It is the human gestural skills involved in the making of the object and the skilled use of the object that were important for Leroi-Gourhan.¹¹¹ Jonathan Smith's insight

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Libet, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8 (1985): 529–66.

¹⁰⁸ I have a rather extensive critique of Libet's work that I must save for another occasion.

¹⁰⁹ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996). This work is discussed in depth by Barbara in *Desire and Distance*.

¹¹⁰ Or, God forbid, a “god-spot” in the brain.

¹¹¹ André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1964] 1993).

that gestural studies will be important to the future of the study of religion encourages us to look to Leroi-Gourhan and others who have explored the richness of gesture.¹¹²

Gesture in the fullest sense must not be understood as some physical substitute for a failed or impossible act of communication: the thumbing action of trying to get a lift when drivers of potential rides cannot hear the making of a verbal request. Gesture, in the richest sense, cannot be adequately reduced to the meaning implications of natural language. Gesture, more fully appreciated, is the repetitive practice that is satisfying in its own performance (autotelic) yet also cumulative as in the development of skills. In structure, gesture complements (is a perspective on) experience, both fully present; both accumulating in a wholistic sort of way over time through repetition. Gesture requires movement, self-movement, and thus it is necessarily of the body. And body is not separable from history and geography and psychology. Gesture is also always prosthetic in that it is movement extending out from the body both to inquire and to express. Self-moving as gesture is then the foundation to perception—that transcendence that allows us to connect with our environs in ways that result in affect, if also sometimes knowledge. Self-moving as gesture is the basis for growth and development. Repetition of gesture is never boring or redundant, for it is inseparable from feeling presence and the accumulation of acumen, thus also freedom and creativity.¹¹³

While self-movement is inseparable from life itself, the specific composition of gesture is acquired in a context of culture, history, and psychology. Gesture, as inseparable from perception, is powerfully influenced by environmental influence. In the context of community and culture we learn how to move in patterns that construct and enact identity. The accumulation of the acumen of cultural gesture is the acquisition of the skills that we use to practice and negotiate and develop the nuances of identity in all its complexity. Gesture is acquired and practiced in the processes of being who we are rather than in what they mean.

While we think of gesture in these terms mostly as appropriate to the acquisition and development of skill and acumen as in, say, sports or music, gesture seems of central importance both to the subject of the study of religion and to the academic processes developed to accomplish these studies.

¹¹² See Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing / Gestures / Producing Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹¹³ For fuller discussion of gesture see the chapters “Moving” and “Gesturing” in my *Dancing Culture Religion* and the chapter “As Prayer Goes So Goes Religion” in my *Creative Encounters*.

Matter becomes religiously significant in the hands of human beings. We are makers, and, as I explore in considerable depth with many specific examples in *Religion and Technology into the Future: From Adam to Tomorrow's Eve* (2018), making is invariably interwoven with religion throughout human history, even that associated with the forefront of modern technology. We seem obsessed with artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, envisioned both by scientists and in the imaginative consideration of artists as leading eventually to the making of a fully sentient, yet artificial, being. Almost invariably the contemplation of this achievement identifies the makers as gods. Such an identification reminds us that this idea is not modern, but has a history dating from antiquity, with such stories as Pygmalion and Galatea and a long history of automata.

Material, as considered to be religiously and culturally important, is never comprehensible apart from the relationship with self-moving human beings. Materials become interesting through being touched and used and engaged with gesture and palpated to engage proprioceptors.

Now You See It, Now You Won't

I recently had lunch with a friend who also has had a long career studying religion. We were both attending the annual conglomerate meeting of the major professional organizations that have to do with the study of religion attended by thousands of scholars. We agreed that there is some question as to the importance and value of studying religion; older men being honest. I believe there is value to teaching young people to engage in concerns common to humanity, to create beauty (which in some sense I believe possible for an academic), to do as little harm as possible to others and to the world, and to frame our efforts in a context of values greater than the insular measures small groups tend to form (measures that seem to mean the world to the members of the small cohort, yet not so much in the larger world). What we do should matter, should make a difference. Throughout my career I've constantly told students that their reading and writing and thinking and acting should always be done with the intent to make a difference; that somehow some way even "schoolgirl/schoolboy" exercises must be training to contribute and to do so with intention and conscience.

Over the years and decades I have experienced a deepening passion for engaging my research in conversation with students and anyone else I can

wrangle to appreciate the miracle that is being human; the magnificence of human biology that enables us to be imaginative, aware, reflective, self-moving, sensing, perceiving, questioning beings that can be characterized by having an aesthetic of impossibles. As utterly ill-fitting as it has almost always seemed to me, religions and the strange efforts to create a properly academic study of them offer rich and endless opportunities for this enterprise, hopefully worth enduring the endless popular misunderstandings that seem always to accompany the profession.

When asking the honest question of the value of what we do as religion scholars, we might take refuge in the idea that we are isolated and don't have any real impact on the world; this seems pathetic to me. Yet I believe that we must do what we do mindful of its impact, or lack thereof, intentional and unintentional, on our subjects, on those around us, and on the world in which we live. While academics, particularly in the humanities, often think their work irrelevant to the greater world (is this low esteem for the subfield or a kind of elitist arrogance?), there is often a sense that we don't need to be so self-aware or intentional in this larger frame because no one outside our cohort reads us anyway. It has been a peculiarity of so much of my work over the years to see that even the most obscure of academic works often shapes, even determines, the course of history of their subjects. And this influence is often not even known to contemporary subjects.

I recall a story of Ruth Benedict, an ethnographer, who was widely known for her studies of the Pima (Tohono O'odham) in southern Arizona. She retired to Denver and years later was visited by Pima elders who asked her to help them remember their tradition. In *Writing Culture* James Clifford tells a story of conversations with a person in a culture he was studying who, when Clifford asked his subject a question, sought the answer in published ethnographies.¹¹⁴ I know that Australian Aboriginal cultures were extensively reshaped by the influence of the writings of Spencer, Gillen, and even Eliade. I know that the Lakota were influenced by John Neihardt's romanticized book about Black Elk. And on and on. As I have written before, I don't believe that we should treat our subjects (even if historically and geographically greatly removed) as mere objects or as totally isolated from us. Rather I believe that our studies should be and are, like it or not, always creative encounters. What should distinguish the academic enterprise in these encounters is that we should take the responsibility for creating and changing and impacting our

¹¹⁴ Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*.

subject of study in our encounter (and I think this creative process is surely why we do what we do), and we must take the responsibility that comes with the awareness that we have an impact on our subjects and the world. Tylor often directed Spencer to get Gillen to come up with a “primitive” example to support the advancement of his theories, yet our real subjects are not mere exempla to be concocted and adjusted solely for our own academic ends. In a way, the distinction that Justice Clark made is an impossible one, however appropriately directed.

As Smith reminded us, religion (singular) is the invention of the scholar and as such meets primarily the needs and interests of the scholars and their (our) cultural, historical, and personal interests. We invent religion as a comparative academic category that we might better comprehend and appreciate what it means to be human. There may well be tensions, incongruities, incompatibilities, irreconcilabilities between our study of religion and the religious worldviews of those we study. An ongoing creative encounter. Yet our invention of religion for our (Western intellectual and cultural) interests is important because it shares broader folk interests in what constitutes a rich understanding of the modern folk category religion.

Frazer spent more than twenty-five years transcribing and reinventing cultural exempla into categories and classifications. Smith's study of Frazer held that, at least on a certain level, Frazer pursued his work with no question in mind; thus he could find no answers. Yet Smith's long and detailed study found that Frazer was influenced by the study of his subjects (the primitive, as identified in one instance) and that he was at some level motivated by his own concerns with death (the most personal and existential concerns with his own death). Yet I think few of us would be able to pick up Frazer's massive work and, without Smith's guidance and insights, ever be able to find these concerns to be fundamental to Frazer. Smith showed repeatedly that Frazer was never clear or consistent about what he was doing in this massive work; any self-consciousness was at best vague and constantly shifting.

Smith's half century of academic writing and teaching can be easily shown to have been directed toward many specific issues (those distinctive to a subfield), toward the broader academic concerns of method and pedagogy, and toward exemplifying the richness and profundity of human beings as manifest in the terms we label religion, and certainly also regularly to engage what must be the fundamental markers of a proper academic study of religion. Burton Mack articulated a number of these as characterizing his first

encounter with Smith. I've quoted his statement in the introduction to this book, yet part of it bears repeating here.

No ontologized Sacred. No divine agency. No dramatic breakthrough events, whether primordial or personal. No romanticism. No mysticism. No otherworldly symbolism. Instead, human ingenuity, taking note of situations, crafting languages, constructing grammars, working with symbol systems, manipulating displacements, marking icons, attending to collective ratiocination, deciding upon strategies of application, rules of exegesis, classification, comparison, structural social and imaginary world-building.¹¹⁵

A proper academic study is a human and hopefully a humane study; religion through and through comprises actions of human ingenuity, the inventions of human imagination. There is no presumption of or primacy to anything identified as sacred or divine; these categories and labels designate products of human inventiveness. How they come to be and how they serve human interests is an important part of a proper academic study of religion. A proper academic study does not presume some breakthrough events (events initiated beyond human reality); such events, whether personal or posited as primordial, are the results of ongoing human creativity. There is nothing special (mystical or romantic or good) about religion (nothing *sui generis*); indeed, these standards are based in a specific cultural history. Religion is always already body, always already material, always already self-moving. For religion to be cultural and historical it must occur in bodies that are distinct in always being located somewhere, sometime. For religion to be understood in terms of human ingenuity it must be also biological (in the broadest sense of the term) that we might understand the evolved capacities that distinguish humans among the great family of animate organisms. To develop a proper academic study of religion on the premise that humans are bodies allows the study to at once be relevant to all human beings and also to appreciate the distinctiveness and difference of specific individuals and groups.

¹¹⁵ Mack, "Sacred Persistence," 299.

Smith's Golden Bough

Titles were a persistent mode in which Smith manifested what I feel are the most pervasive, if also often tacit, of his insights and recommendations. The title of his great Frazer work was “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*.” The title itself is a riddle. How do glory and jest relate? Does Frazer’s work somehow constitute a jest of great quality and insight or precipitating wonderful laughter? Is Frazer’s work somehow all of these things if not simultaneously so? Then in the subtitle Smith does not say “Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*”; he conjoins them. Is Smith’s topic then the relationship between an author and his book? Like Smith’s dissertation, his title raises more questions, and questions that have the style of riddle, than he answers.

As I wrote extensively about in chapter 1, the one article Smith published on his Yale dissertation drew on a phrase found in the darkest and most enigmatic line in a centuries-old, yet well known, lullaby that held the single word, “bough,” in common with his Frazer dissertation as well as Frazer’s own title (whether or not it was his actual topic throughout, and it was not). I looked at a history of the way the lyrics of this lullaby have appeared over time, and clearly it is the darkness and enigmatic character of that particular line that is so often changed. What child could be lulled into peaceful sleep by the line “when the bough breaks / the cradle will fall / and down will come baby / cradle and all”?¹¹⁶ And then Smith’s very subject in his dissertation often drew on the same riddling style. The title of his chapter 4 of Part I is “No Answers, No Questions.” This title draws on the famous deathbed scene of Gertrude Stein. It relates that Frazer’s work has potential flaws because it was driven by no questions; thus, it arrived at no answers. Yet we know that Smith always preferred questions to answers anyway. Furthermore, the coincidence of this anecdote’s scene being on the occasion of death—the time when one would hope for the right questions and answers—correlates with the deeply engaged concerns that Frazer pursued throughout his work, how to defeat death with death? This seeming paradox is the basis for the riddle

¹¹⁶ Ha! Well, actually “most babies” is the answer. But this too is an insight into Smith’s riddle. Babies are lulled to sleep by the repetitive rhythms of the human singing voice. The lullaby is to the one sung to, not a message, but a gestural practice, a repetitive performance. It works not because of what it says or means, but because of its performance in the context of bedtime rituals. And it works for big babies as well.

of agricultural religions with their harvesting and sowing ritual cycles, as it is also that of the Christ event, the foundation of Christianities.

Smith titled the entire first part of his dissertation, comprising four chapters, “*Homo Ludens: Frazer as Play.*” The Latin word *ludens* is the present active participle of the verb *ludere*, which itself is cognate with the noun *ludus*. *Ludus* has no direct equivalent in English, as it simultaneously refers to sport, play, school, and practice. Johan Huizinga published a book in 1938 titled *Homo Ludens* that, curiously, Smith does not include in his bibliography.¹¹⁷ I spent decades studying play and, while so many find Huizinga’s work the principal authority on play, I always found it to be flawed (ego-driven flaunting of knowledge of intellectual history), and his definitional statements on play to be vague and uninteresting. However, the term *ludens* itself is fascinating in that it not only includes play, but also implicates school and practice. I have attempted to understand Frazer’s more than quarter century of highly repetitive labor in terms of the gestural practice that creates the school (academic) acuity that can eventually lead to the graceful practice of intellection. In the final section of Smith’s dissertation, titled “Frazer Redivivus?,” the term “redivivus” means “come back to life” or “reborn.” Throughout the entire long first parts of his dissertation Smith appears to kill Frazer and his work, seemingly trashing it (him) in often the harshest terms. It is also easy to read his “When the Bough Breaks” article as evidence of the same destruction of Frazer. Yet it seems that in this last section Smith is demonstrating the principle Frazer was so interested in, overcoming death with death. In this last section, Smith brings Frazer’s work back to life, he rebirths it, resurrects it and Frazer too. Smith attests to the possibility of the outcomes of Frazer’s repetitive work. Yet, riddling as always, Smith adds a question mark to the term “redivivus,” leaving us to wonder if Frazer is truly reborn.

The term “play” itself is a riddle. It often implicates the light and unserious, the mere trifling at something, yet it has been at the center of serious philosophical works for centuries.¹¹⁸ In Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793),¹¹⁹ play is given the status of a human drive, yet it exists only as the third thing of the dynamic Smith labeled “the necessary double-face” and what I have referred to as both impossible copresence and

¹¹⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (New York: Beacon Press, 1968).

¹¹⁸ See my “Play.”

¹¹⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1793] 1967). Traditionally Schiller references are made by indicating letter and paragraph.

an aesthetic of impossibles. Schiller's *Letters* were an elegant presentation of several examples of opposing and impossibly copresent forces or drives that nonetheless exist together and necessarily so, perhaps the most prominent of which are the "form drive" (*Formtrieb*) and the "sense drive" (*Stofftrieb*). He identified "a reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the activity of the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active" (XIV.1).

When these two drives are copresent and interacting in concert, Schiller says that a third drive, play (*Spieltrieb*) arises. Play names the oscillatory moving dynamic relationship arising from an impossible copresence. Play is a distinction of human vitality, as Schiller states in this chiasm: "Man plays only when he is in the full sense a human being, and he is only a human being when he plays." And Schiller identifies this oscillatory moving with aesthetics at a time when the term was first being associated with beauty: "With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play."¹²⁰ The presentation as chiasm is an aesthetic that Maurice Merleau-Ponty would certainly appreciate.

And nearly two centuries later Jacques Derrida wrote of play in such a way as to leave play still at play when all else has been deconstructed:

There are . . . two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay [*jeu*].¹²¹ The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.¹²²

¹²⁰ For a fuller discussion of Schiller on play see my *Dancing Culture Religion*, 127–37, and my *Creative Encounters*, 205–11.

¹²¹ Given my focus on movement/moving it is perhaps significant that Derrida's translator chose the English word "freeplay" as the proper rendering of the French *jeu*, which has a number of game- and play-related meanings, yet in mechanics indicates a space between two adjacent parts to allow free movement. Indeed, the impact of Derrida's refusal to reject in the name of play both "interpretations of interpretation" argues for the endless continuity of oscillatory movement.

¹²² Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 264.

Derrida rejected both interpretations of interpretation on the basis that each alone is trivial and that we must first “try to conceive of the common ground, and the difference of this irreducible difference.”¹²³ Even to choose play is to stop play in that it is halting, ending the freedom of movement. There is primacy to self-moving. While Derrida chose to express the impossible copresence in terms of childbirth and monstrosity, Smith chose jest and riddle. The play must go on.

Smith’s essay “I Am a Parrot (Red)” (1972)¹²⁴ follows the comparative technique that he used so extensively in his Frazer studies, checking the cultural examples other scholars use to establish their conclusions in light of the sources from which their examples were taken. In this essay, Smith focuses on the use of a statement attributed to the Bororo of Brazil to address a classic issue. Smith shows that as early as 1894 the issue of classification was shaped by the consideration, as stated by Von den Steinen: “The Bororos boast of themselves that they are red parrots (Araras).”¹²⁵ My concern here is principally with Smith’s style of titling essays, so I’ll not review the argument of this essay. I will say that there are clues he first learned of this example in his Frazer studies.¹²⁶ But to cut to the chase, when Smith checked Von den Steinen’s own text he found that the account on the Bororo is actually not relevant to the issue it was so often made to address. The Bororo statement was quoted in error. Smith also showed that a number of noted scholars had offered their own interpretations based only on their acceptance of Von den Steinen’s erroneous presentation. We might then understand that Smith’s use of the term “red” and especially his putting it in parentheses as a way of emphasizing it was as much a reference to the embarrassed color of the faces of these scholars as to anything relating to the actual folks in Brazil.

Yet Smith is not satisfied with simply embarrassing other scholars; his principal concern is to engage a fundamental issue of a proper academic study of religion. As he puts it in his summation of this essay, “The history of the exegesis of the Bororo statement has driven us to raise the question of truth from which, as historians of religion, we have largely abstained.”¹²⁷ While

¹²³ Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play,” 265.

¹²⁴ Smith, “I Am a Parrot.” I’ll cite the reprinting of the essay in Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 264–88.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Smith, “I Am a Parrot,” 266.

¹²⁶ The clue for this influence is Smith’s citation of the Bororo example in Frazer as one of his initial examples. Given that this essay was first presented at an AAR symposium in 1971 shortly after he finished his Yale dissertation and it is loaded with footnotes from ethnographic sources for the Bororo, surely Smith’s attention was first drawn to this example while engaged in his Frazer study.

¹²⁷ Smith, “I Am a Parrot,” 287.

Smith notes that the scholarly history he traces in this essay is a “tracing of the history of an error,”¹²⁸ he nonetheless raises a concern that is never peripheral to the study of religion. How do we take as statements of truth those facts we feel/believe to be impossible? The Bororo say, “I am a red parrot.” The Hopi say, “We dance for rain.” The Christians say, “God is man, man is God, death is life eternal.” The style of Smith’s essay title echoes his principal concern, which is among the most fundamental to a proper academic study of religion.

Smith’s autobiographical 2004 essay (he calls it “bio-bibliographical”) is titled “When the Chips Are Down.”¹²⁹ In a way I think quite uncharacteristic of Smith, he opens this essay with an explanation of the title.¹³⁰ He recalls that his colleague Mircea Eliade was fascinated that Smith tended to use the phrase so often in their discussions. Smith indicates that his first encounter with the phrase was his reading of Sartre’s play *Les jeux son faits* (1947), noting that he understood Sartre’s use of the phrase as a “gaming term that signals finality.” His use, he proclaims, has “less urgency,” having the connotation “when all is said and done.” Smith says, appropriate to an autobiographical essay, “I want to turn the phrase on myself and account for my most persistent interests as a scholar of religion.”¹³¹

At this point, in this chapter that honors Smith’s life and work following his death, his intended understanding of the phrase is certainly appropriate. What I have done, in such a small measure, in this book is to ask, “When all is said and done (when the chips are down), what has been Smith’s contribution?” Acknowledging my half-century relationship with Smith, I have needed to ask, “Now that the chips are down, how has Smith impacted my work? What has Smith suggested for the establishment of a proper academic study of religion, and what might ‘following Smith’ at this point entail?” Yet, to honor Smith, something might be said by considering his title apart from his explanation; surely this is what he would do. The phrase “when the chips are down” occurs, as he noted, in gaming contexts. Specifically, it is a term used in betting games like poker that use chips. In this context it can mean either the moment when win or lose is about to be revealed or as a sign of persistent losses. That is, when everyone has put chips down for the bet, when

¹²⁸ Smith, “I Am a Parrot,” 283.

¹²⁹ Smith, “Chips.”

¹³⁰ My suspicion is that he found his story of Mircea Eliade’s response to his use of this phrase more important than the unartful explanation of the riddle. Yet I find this storytelling evidence that Smith’s seeming explanation is not definitive, that the riddle, the play, must persist.

¹³¹ Smith, “Chips,” 1.

all the chips are down, that signals the moment when winners and losers are about to be revealed.¹³² It is a critical moment of tension related to an anticipated outcome that will have consequences. Yet, most importantly it is the moment before outcomes are known. Alternatively, the phrase may refer to the persistence of loss, as in one's stack of chips having dwindled due to repeated losses. Yet, even here, since there are at least some chips remaining, there is still hope; one is still in the game. This use too refers to a time of tension related to the pending unknown. Will one's luck change, or will one lose the last chips and go bust?

The Cambridge Dictionary notes that the chips phrase indicates an occasion “when you are in a very difficult or dangerous situation, especially one that makes you understand the true value of people or things,” as in, “One day when the chips are down, you will know who your true friends are.”¹³³ After a generation of placing our bets, of putting down our chips, of mapping our territories, of making and playing our theories, how much of the promise of Smith's work have we achieved?¹³⁴ Have we placed a bet holding a promising hand eagerly anticipating a windfall?¹³⁵ Or have we experienced such persistent losses, given the marked decline of the humanities and religious studies, that our future existence is questionable? My sense is we are closer to the latter than the former, all the more urgency in engaging the rich legacy of Smith's life's work. In doing so we might realize that Smith, via his legacy, hangs with us no matter what as our “true friend.”¹³⁶ We must ask, “How might we both understand the core energetics and potential of Smith's program and insights and also keep Smith in play and continue his work far

¹³² I need to note my awareness that the phrase can also mean “an initial commitment,” as in putting chips down as an ante that initiates the process. To put chips down at this point commits them and the player to the process. This is but a different phase of the use I discuss.

¹³³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/when-the-chips-are-down> (consulted February 20, 2019). Based on my sense of the field, limited admittedly to incidental experience, I feel that religion as a proper academic field is not in particularly good health and that, should we fail to recognize this, we'll also fail to appreciate that Jonathan Smith is a true friend we'll need to go forward.

¹³⁴ Setting the beginning of the academic study of religion as coincident with Justice Clark's opinion in the case *Abingdon v. Schempp* in 1963 and the end of the generation with Jonathan's 2017 death or his retirement in 2013.

¹³⁵ I can't pass by the opportunity to note this “hand” metaphor, a collection of cards being referred to by the human appendage we use to hold these cards. Elsewhere—Sam Gill, “Thumbelina's Severed Head,” in *Religion and Technology*—I have considered the importance of the evolutionary development of the human hand with its distinctive opposable thumb—even the existence of our thumbs—as fundamental to the evolution of the large human brain that is capable of metaphor. This is an example of an impossible copresence; a hand is not a collection of playing cards, yet it is.

¹³⁶ Abundant evidence is the experience I share with many longtime readers of Smith. Each reading reveals new and unexpected insights and inspirations seemingly overlooked on earlier readings.

beyond the explicit confines of his own specific cultural, historical, phenomenological, and theoretical studies?"

Smith used another gaming reference in a 2010 lecture at the University of Colorado. I was thrilled that he was invited to deliver a lecture in one of the university's most prestigious lecture series, the Cox Family Lecture.¹³⁷ Also, I wanted to take advantage of Smith's career-long history in the study of religion in a sort of Janus exercise of standing in the doorway looking back forty years as the background and context for a projection forward through the next forty years. Smith chose a title with another gaming reference, "Now You See It, Now You Won't: Religious Studies over the Next Forty Years." Some of my colleagues were opposed to Smith's title and wanted to ask him to change it. Their concern was that the title seemed to suggest that the study of religion might not exist in the future. In discussing the title with me, Smith said it was inspired by his remembering the time he spent in New York City parks watching the play of the gambling game Three Cup Monte, also known as the shell game. A pea is placed under one of three half shells, and after moving them around in patterns, the game master shows that the pea remains under the shell where we saw it put—"Now you see it!" But then after the master further moves the shells around, the player is asked, with his or her bet down, to indicate which shell covers the pea. Invariably the player gets it wrong—"Now you won't!"¹³⁸ Smith's lecture reviewed the past study of religion and looked to its future, yet he did not explain the riddle or his use of it. As usual, he leaves it, as also the future of the study of religion, to us, to provoke us.¹³⁹ Is the future of the study of religion and its emerging scholars, the pea, the game master (*magister ludi*), the obscuring shells, or the player? Is the future study of religion, as related to the past, a game of deception? A sleight-of-hand illusion? Or something we will most always fail to successfully locate? In considering Smith's title, it is difficult to avoid some sense of anxious tension related to the current unfolding of the field of study; it seems

¹³⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfuypty7LGw>.

¹³⁸ I find of interest Smith's choice of the word "won't" rather than "don't." "Won't" seems more definitive to me than "don't," indicating that this game is "fixed" to ensure that the player loses. Indeed, the game is often considered a scam. This word choice too is a jest of sorts. Does it not suggest that Jonathan is sure that we students of religion are destined to fail? Perhaps that we are engaged in a scam? But then we don't know quite what role the study of religion plays in this analogy.

¹³⁹ Indeed, some of my colleagues were disturbed at the implication of the end of religious studies and, in a faculty meeting, discussed asking Jonathan to change his title. I'm rather certain he would not have changed his title even if asked, which fortunately didn't occur. During the discussion none of the faculty seemed aware that it referenced the shell game or that it had anything to do with jokes, jests, or riddles. In my experience, Jonathan was completely happy to lay a joke or jest that might never be discovered. In the faculty discussion I chose not to "spill the beans."

unavoidable that Smith might well have been suggesting that, after all of our moving things around for forty years, we've lost the object we thought we were tracking.¹⁴⁰

My career spans almost precisely the period in which religion studies were mandated to become something other than an intellectual aspect of the religious study of a particular religion; in this time, religion study had to be invented in a way appropriate to a modern secular academy. I believe that reading and rereading all of Jonathan Smith's works, engaging the effort to identify and follow not only his specific examples and models but also his style and the general implications of his persistent concern with the necessary double-face, and taking seriously his repeated warnings that we have yet to develop a proper academic study of religion are essential to the very survival of this study and also to the inspiration for the development of the remarkable potential the field promises.

¹⁴⁰ Or, to maintain one possibility, that in a postmodern world, we have only the illusion (a hyper-real pea) that we have a subject about which we might have valued questions with possible significant answers. No answers; no questions.

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