

Play and the Future of the Study of Religion ... and the Academy¹

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I am grateful to Tyler Roberts and Mark Taylor for their interesting discussions in their recent JAAR articles of the differences and similarities between religion and the academic study of religion.² I am pleased that both discuss the issue, in part, in terms of “play.” I am delighted that some of my writings are included in their discussion.³ I am also grateful to be introduced to the recent work of Mark Taylor.⁴ Mark has long been a highly creative, engaging, and respected contributor to the study of religion. I respond here to acknowledge the insights of Roberts and Taylor and to write a few things that might continue the discussion of the issues they raise. Surely for the academic study of religion we need to be as clear and insightful as possible about these issues. We need chart a radically new course for the study of religion and the academy in which it dwells.

The thing that Roberts wrote of my work that I found most provocative that may also relate to larger concerns is what is for him a tension between my seeing the study of religion as well as religious life being shaped by play and my sense that religions are characterizable as humorless, which he understands as lacking play. The tension is then, as I understand him, between characterizing religions as both playful and humorless, or not playful. Thinking about Roberts’s observation, there are several things to say.

First, I think the structurality implied in “study” and “other” demands hierarchy. Insofar as religions are formally based on the rather locative position of holding some beliefs, some people, some perspectives to be literally true and unquestionable and I think aspects of many, if not all, religions have some presence of this type of position, it is difficult as a scholar, at this point in western academic and philosophical history, to accept such a position without somehow “bracketing” it. This dilemma is that scholarship, being comparative, humanistic, and embracing of the statements and actions of all others, however incongruous or conflicted, is in marked contrast with the reality and ontology of most of those we study. This is the issue I struggled with, as Roberts points out, at the end of *Storytracking*.⁵ At some point, I think, we need to deconstruct ourselves and in so doing, as I attempted to do in *Storytracking*, we must stand at once in two places, which is in some sense equivalent to having no firm place to stand. Our work is done from a position, acknowledged if we are honest, located above and superior to our subjects. Yet, our own values and goals insist that no such position of superior knowledge and truth is ultimately defensible. Thus we must also see our efforts to make sense of our subjects and our use of

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² Tyler Roberts, “All Work and No Play: Chaos, Incongruity and *Différance* in the Study of Religion” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 2009, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 81-104 and Mark Taylor, “Refiguring Religion” *JAAR*, March 2009, vol. 77, no.1, pp. 105-19.

³ Sam Gill, “Play” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 451-464 and “No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, the Academic Study of Religion as *Sub Specie Ludi*.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March 1998, vol. 66, pp. 283-312.

⁴ Mark Taylor, *After God* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁵ Sam Gill, *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, and Histories in Central Australia*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

the invented subject “religion” are serving our own way of trying to make sense of the world in the context of our own history and culture. Now standing in two places at once is to engage in the oscillatory structurality I think we must understand as play, lest we find ourselves schizophrenics. More on this in a bit, but my point is that the study of religion must be characterizable as play to be able to live with itself.

Second, in my view, religions, as we have invented them, are in the same situation. In the most general terms, religions are based on some givens, unquestionables, uncontrovertables, and these are often best seen in the context of sacred texts, religious writings, religious leaders, doctrine, canon, deity. In this aspect of religion, I think there is little room for humor,⁶ little space for play. In this aspect the very purpose of religion is to bring an end to play, to detest play, and to hold forth a solid truth. Yet, for the balance of religion, that enormous domain of religious life that is not much considered by students of religion, these strict statements and positions must then be applied to the exigencies of life. We all know that application cannot be done by the simple submission of life to rules, because the existential qualities of life never hold still, never actually fit. Life is never locative, only rules. Thus, religious life is the negotiation and application and manipulation of rules to meet the exigent conditions presented by life and vice versa. This negotiative process, I argue, must be characterized, in one set of terms, as play, in that there is an oscillatory negotiative and never-ending process that engages the mandates of locative positions set forth by the tenets of religion in the ongoing play of religious life.

What I am saying here cannot be said more clearly than did Jonathan Smith, to whom I am indebted, in his discussion of myth. He wrote, “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.”⁷

So I think that Roberts has caught my lack of clarity in properly distinguishing between my identity of religion with the common official, doctrinal, locative aspect that indeed exists in religions and is the aspect of religion most considered by the study of religion, and the, to me, much more interesting aspect of religion, which is the playful processes of living a religious life in terms of the application of these precepts. There is in religions both the play of application and the oscillatory play between the play of application and the resistance to play in the aspects of religion that are humorless unquestioned and authoritative, the aspect of religions currently most considered by the study of religion.

As I have said, I don’t actually think that the study of religion, or the academy in general for that matter,⁸ is any different. Indeed, it seems the whole motivator for Roberts’s essay arises from a kind of frustration that we, as students of religion, can’t seem to say and agree on who we are, what we do, and what distinguishes us. He seems frustrated by what he sees as a sort of retrenchment in a view of religion as simply a locative enterprise. And, indeed, there is a drive and necessity to know ourselves, if for no other reason than that in today’s economy we might hope to survive. To simply acknowledge that religion and the study of religion are both characterized by play leaves us, in the dominant mindset

⁶ Remember that Kundera identifies humor with profanation.

⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map is Not Territory” in *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, orig. 1978)

⁸ Gill, “Play as Pedagogy” 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com

of our time, in a no-place without objective, without grounds for proclaiming our value,⁹ and ultimately without budget. No wonder there is this retrenchment.

Further, I would suggest that this propensity toward embracing religions and the study of religions as adequately characterizable as locative, rests ultimately in our own history, in the deep well of our past. I find Walter Capps's book *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*¹⁰ of major value in that it documents our heritage. We exist as a result of a very long lineage of white, male, sedentary, intellectual, Christians. Even in the effort to embrace a postmodern world, scholars of religion remain principally white, male, sedentary, and intellectual. As I argued in "Embodied Theology"¹¹ such a heritage underlies the character of the western academy. That theory is theology is a central position in Mark Taylor's work.¹²

As Mark Johnson shows in *The Meaning of the Body*¹³ all our higher cognitive processes are based in subconscious sensorimotor patterns that are forged in our patterns of movement, our posture, our bodily *habitus*. In his discussion of meaning-making in art, Johnson noted "The idea that only words have meanings ignores vast stretches on the landscape of human meaning-making."¹⁴ Students of religion need take this seriously. Surely compared to religion there is no subject of study more richly textured by images and actions that are not based in words nor adequately captured by words—art, music, architecture, ritual, pilgrimage, landscapes, colors, mountains, trees, dancing, dramatic performances, praying, gesturing, clothing and vestments, hair styles, eating, drinking, animals, fasting, killing, birthing, initiating, dying, marrying, nurturing, loving, laying on of hands, circumcision, tooth extraction, menstruation, sub-incision, singing. Is there an end to this list? Yet, surely there is no academic endeavor more word-bound, headier, more hostile to the senses and emotion, than the academic study of religion.

Roberts can catch me in another tension here. I see that the study of religion, very much like the *modus operandi* of the academy, tends to locative, objectivist, rule worshipping, production, seeking the establishment of definitive conclusions, and thus the enemy of play. Yet, I believe that the creative practice of the study of religion and the processes of the academy in general, are grounded in the processes of hypothetic inference, what Peirce called abduction, and that these processes are never free of lively play. Peirce recognized abduction and play as synonymous.¹⁵

⁹ It seems pretty clear that to justify ourselves in terms of holding that our play has a strength even greater than production on the model of Jean Baudrillard's "seduction," has very little chance of being understood and accepted by administrators and legislators and budget officers, although ultimately I think this is the very argument we must learn how to make and to be heard making it.

¹⁰ Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000).

¹¹ Sam Gill, "Embodied Theology." In *Shifting Paradigms: Theology, Religious Studies, and the University*, edited by Delwin Brown and Linell Cady. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 81 - 92

¹² Mark Taylor, "Refiguring Religion" JAAR, March 2009, vol. 77, no.1, p. 105.

¹³ Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Sam Gill, "Charles Sanders Peirce: Play and the Logic of Discovery" 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com

Roberts's selectivity in his presentation does not always clearly reflect that for Smith, Taylor, and me meaning as always negotiative, always processual. Certainly Roberts's quotation of Taylor (p. 95) that opposes meaning and purpose with disruption, dislocation and disfiguring is naïve and, if I understand Taylor's view, surely a misrepresentation of him. For Taylor locative is in service to the virtual. Roberts also misunderstands Smith, I think, by not adequately acknowledging that for Smith "comparison" and "application" always require the oscillatory interaction of order and chaos, that is, meaning always depends on incongruity which is always already there. Smith's own description of his "persistent preoccupations" includes these dynamics of meaning-making in every one.¹⁶

While the study of religion is hostile to the senses, emotion, and motion, Mark Johnson shows that for at least the last thirty years, scientists and scholars in a variety of fields¹⁷ have powerfully established what was adumbrated early in the twentieth century by William James and John Dewey and before them by Charles Sanders Peirce. I don't think at this point we have much of a clue how to take that giant step beyond our limited word-bound understanding of meaning. But I also believe that now is the time to accept the challenge to be open to what we might do. The potential is surely great and the promise is exciting.

There is a strong correlation between what I am discussing here in both religion and the study of religion and the distinction Schiller made more than three centuries ago between formal and sensual drives.¹⁸ Indeed, while admittedly I have yet to carefully study Mark Taylor's *After God*, it seems to me he is saying little more than what Schiller wrote more than 300 years ago. And it is in the same vein as Peirce's "abduction," Merleau-Ponty's "flesh," Baudrillard's "seduction," Derrida's "différance," Smith's "comparison" and "application," and my "dance."¹⁹ Taylor's "virtual" appears to be little advance beyond these concepts; it only appears so because of the peculiar context of limited expectations held by the tradition of students of religion. An important question is "Where are such expectations grounded?" "Why should this be so?"

Mark Johnson shows us how the human body tends, by its own structure and methods, to hide from our awareness of it. We live as bodied minds, since our bodies aren't normally the object of our attention we relate to the world beyond our bodies as body-minds. We don't see our seeing, hear our hearing, taste our tasting. Yet, it is clear that we have no access to the world or ourselves as anything but bodies.

¹⁶ Jonathan Smith, "When the Chips Are Down" in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004)

¹⁷ I present only Mark Johnson's work here in a tiny bit of detail, but I want to remind that there is an abundant literature on the importance of body to meaning. Johnson and his colleague George Lakoff have written extensively from the perspective of cognitive science. Many other studies are important. See my lecture series "Brain Body Movement" www.Sam-Gill.com for a discussion of some of these.

¹⁸ See my discussion of Schiller in "The Powerful Play Goes On: From Schiller to Baudrillard on Play." www.Sam-Gill.com

¹⁹ My development of dance theory includes considering it as an important and useful way to exemplify the structuralities I have been interested in. I make an explicit comparison of my understanding of dancing with Merleau-Ponty's "flesh ontology" in "Dancing as Making" www.Sam-Gill.com. 2009.

Johnson's focus is on meaning and meaning-making. The heart of his discussion of meaning is that while we are conditioned to understand meaning rather exclusively in terms of concepts and propositions expressed and enacted as words, there is another whole level of meaning-making that occurs more or less outside of our consciousness. Johnson shows that "the idea that meaning and understanding are based solely on propositional structures is problematic because it excludes (or at least hides) most of what goes into the ways we make sense of our experience. ... meaning is shaped by the nature of our bodies, especially our sensorimotor capacities and our abilities to experience feelings and emotions."²⁰ He demonstrates that "our experience of meaning is based, first, on our sensorimotor experience, our feelings, and our visceral connections to our world; and, second, on various imaginative capacities for using sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts."²¹ I have developed the basis for meaning in proprioception in a lengthy discussion in my lecture "Self and Other: Proprioception and Exteroception."²²

Many might accept and grant value to body schemas as being "meaning-like," yet, they are usually set apart as of another order, thus paralleling the divide between mind and body. Johnson repairs this disjunction by invoking John Dewey's "principle of continuity"²³ that holds that these two levels or domains of meaning cannot be separate and unrelated; rather they are built on one another and are fundamentally alike and congruous.²⁴ Johnson insists that, indeed, the conscious cognitive forms of meaning-making depend, in a fundamental way, on the sub-conscious sensorimotor schematic body-meanings. Much of his book is devoted to demonstrating this understanding of meaning-making from a number of perspectives each reflecting a different area of research. The weight of the argument builds throughout the book.

Granting the existence of body-meaning, it is essential for us to ask, given that such meanings are subconscious, how might we discover and uncover these meanings and, if words fail to adequately express or describe them, how can we articulate whatever we might uncover? Johnson describes these body-meanings as qualities, images (but not necessarily visual or conscious mental images), patterns, sensorimotor processes, and emotions. One can describe the environment for the generative formation of these types of meanings. One can describe the qualities and values that are associated with these types of meanings. Such attention cannot be understood as constituting a statement of conceptual or propositional meaning nor any kind of conclusive truth. Yet, accounting for the factors in the formation and presence of these deep-lying body-meanings adds much to our appreciation and understanding of religion as it is practiced, inseparable from emotion, feeling, value, qualities, expectations, associations even if they cannot be articulated in the "higher" sense of conceptual meaning. Further, this complementation to our focus on "higher meaning" enriches our appreciation of the quality, power, passion, engagement, emotion, affect, of all the articulated meanings we endeavor to analyze and construct.

²⁰ Johnson, p. 9.

²¹ Ibid., p. 12.

²² Gill, *Brain, Body, Movement*

²³ Johnson, p. 10.

²⁴ There are many other ways of demonstrating not only continuity but dependence.

The modern academic study of religions is based historically in the tradition of Biblical studies and Christian theology and western intellectual studies, and the comparative study of religions emerges, in part, from the proselytizing efforts of Christian mission interests. While such influences have become tacit, perhaps as much as for any reason so that the study of religion done in state-supported institutions might continue to be legal, the pungent flavor of colonialism is always present in the study of the religions and cultures. As students of religion we study words, texts, written descriptions and what we produce is almost exclusively written and spoken words. Our task is to find or make meaning regarding our subjects, but, to be clear, our subjects are not the people, nor their experiences, nor their relationships with their gods, nor their rituals, nor their dances and musics and actions and joys and feelings. No, our subjects are the words that, I suppose, we somehow believe to represent or describe what we have termed the religions of these peoples. Jonathan Smith made this abundantly clear in his discussion of map and territory. He said that we suppose there are territories of real people and their religions, yet, in the study of religion, "maps are all we have."²⁵ The meanings we find or make are intended to be objective, conceptual, propositional, theoretical, and directed to the establishment of truths and knowledge. Such meanings are produced by the rational mind, by the powers of great minds. We recognize as legitimate only the most disembodied meanings. The privileging of the mind/soul/transcendent spirit, while ignoring that the body and experience, shape, without our conscious awareness, what comes into our field of vision, the scope of our studies. Such a philosophy of meaning truncates our subject to words, and even more limiting, to particular types of words, to specific media for the delivery of words, and to specific types of relationships with these words.

With the rarest of exceptions virtually every religious human being who has ever lived did not traffic in written words of any kind (including scriptures) in her or his understanding of religion and most certainly did not engage in any level of abstract intellectual religious discourse. For virtually all of them, the meaning of their religions has been felt, experienced, enacted, practiced, and grounded in their bodies. That religions are embodied is not the condition of some prior era that we have now, in our expanding literacy, surpassed. Thus, the object of study we scholars call religions scarcely corresponds at all with the religious lives of almost all religious peoples.

Applying this perspective to ourselves, from deep in our heritage, we students of religion are sedentary beings who spend our entire lives sitting and reading and writing. The bodily basis for our thought, restricted to our heads, prejudices us to recognize, across the entire spectrum of reality, only a small slice corresponding with what we take for granted as significant. And this is the locative, doctrinal, textual, principled dimension of our subject; what Schiller called matters of the form drive. We study texts, either sacred or scholarly or authoritative or historical; we do not study bodied actions or application or negotiation; in some senses, because of who we are we cannot even see these. In the frame of the full life and the practice of religion, texts gravitate to the locative, full-bodied actions and movement to the playful. Of course, scholars of religion have identified tensions and dramas and

²⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map is Not Territory," in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

negotiations, characterizeable as play, within the texts and, of even greater interest, between various “readings” or “interpretations” of the texts.²⁶

I teach a writing class for religion majors. Doing so has encouraged me to think about how academics write. It perplexes me how locative and objectivist remain academic writing conventions. In our very academic writing conventions we insist on a world that is locative, objective, clear and definitive and in this way we actually insinuate a false locative view on the world and on our subjects and on our students. How can we find the play in our subjects when there is no play in our own academic writing conventions and analytical methods? Roberts is as locative as the next in this respect as am I in this essay. He holds Jonathan Smith and me to a standard of the necessity of consistency, more or less without regard for the possible shifts in frames, throughout our writings. In academic writing, difference amounts to unacceptable inconsistency rather than to play. Difference can be *différance*.

My study of Jonathan Smith’s work led me to his study of James George Frazer as, in my reading, an impetus for his embracing of play.²⁷ Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, as I see Smith reading it, is a work that is so nuts in some respects that it demands innovation in the reader’s perspective to take it seriously. I quickly note that the serious does not exclude play. Indeed, one of the most irritating things to me is that play is often contrasted with work (as Roberts’s title indicates) and the serious (also present in Roberts’s essay in his unargued identity of Kundera’s “humor” with play). We have a very naïve understanding of play at this point, I think.²⁸ Smith’s reading of Frazer could only work if, as Smith argues so well, Frazer is read as *homo ludens* (Roberts doesn’t include this important work in his discussion of Smith nor an essential related article “When the Bough Breaks” and its Afterword²⁹). Yet, while the possible profundity, rather than the idiocy, of Frazer is possible when he is read as a player, Frazer is not the only one or thing, to which this applies.³⁰ In my reading, Smith’s work persistently exposes and delights in the playful aspects of all subjects: mythology, ritual, religion, and education

²⁶ An interesting example is Roberts’s essay. His general thesis is to show that Taylor fulfills the unmet promise put forth earlier by Smith (and me) regarding the characterization as “play” of religion and the study of religion. He elects to limit his study to his interpretation of texts selected to support his desired conclusion. While I do not recognize his characterization of my work, my views, Roberts did not contact me for any response or to inquire about other possibly relevant writings. I doubt he contacted Smith or Taylor either. The point I make here is that we don’t study people; we don’t really even care about accurate representation; we read texts. The question for me is that there is a deeper underlying emotional motivation for pressing apparent objectivist conclusions, which is clearly Roberts’s goal, and I’m interested in comprehending how that gets formed and how it powers all that we do, even as we are usually unaware that it is doing so.

²⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and The Golden Bough*. PhD dissertation. Yale University, 1969.

²⁸ I have attempted to contribute to the study with a number of essays on the topic that are available as e-publications at www.Sam-Gill.com. “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: Stephen Hawking and A Brief History of Time” 1988, 2009; “Charles Sanders Peirce: Play and the Logic of Discovery” 2009; “The Powerful Play Goes On: Friedrich Schiller to Jean Baudrillard on Play” 2009; “Go Up Into the Gaps: The Play of Native American Religions” 2009; and “Play as Pedagogy” 2009.

²⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” in *Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993)

³⁰ I used a similar approach in my reading of Stephen Hawking, see “The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: Stephen Hawking and A Brief History of Time” 1988, 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com. The title reflects my inspiration by Smith’s reading of Frazer.

(and Roberts does not include a discussion of a key article on play and education by Smith³¹). From my perspective it is his eagerness to reveal the unexpected, the perplexing, the incongruous, the unconscionable in religion and the study of religion that has distinguished Smith's work and the greater value is in his reluctance to give a quick resolution to the play.

Let me illustrate the playful way Smith treats religion and the study of religion by considering the last paragraph of "Map is Not Territory."

Such are three maps of the worlds of other men. They are not to be identified with any particular culture at any particular time. They remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man's experience of the world. Other maps will be drawn as the scholar of religions continues his task. The materials described in this paper suggest that we may have to relax some of our cherished notions of significance and seriousness. We may have to become initiated by the other whom we study and undergo the ordeal of incongruity. For we 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.³²

This passage is remarkable in many ways and deserves extensive reflection. Yet, here I focus only on Smith's apparent shifting between religion, that is, the worlds of other men, and the study of religion, that is, our mapping of those worlds. Even the first sentence is ambiguous in allowing the reader to determine if the three maps are those maps made by "other men" or maps scholars make of the worlds of other men. And, notably, he has named only two of them. Smith has spoken of the play dynamic of myth and ritual as mapping processes used by "other men" in relating them to religious experience. Yet, Smith soon turns to the discovery of maps to be "drawn as the scholar of religions continues his task." Then he draws on the ritual terms "initiation" and "ordeal" to suggest that the scholar need undergo a ritual transformation and that the scholar's ritual guide is his subject. He then beseeches us to "reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps," which would suggest that this incongruity arises in the comparative endeavor to correlate our scholarly constructed maps with the territory of other men, yet he says we must do this before we set out on a voyage of discovery, that is, an actual encounter with other men. And, after referring repeatedly to religion as the experience other men have of their world, and of the scholarly enterprise of mapping these experiences, he ends with the most complex—let me say playful—incongruity and conundrum. Smith first reminds us that map is not territory. This difference between map and territory, this gap, is the field of play. But then he concludes with the statement that "maps are all we possess" suggesting that we remain in the insular world of texts, writings about other men, and there is no way to engage the play of comparing these maps with any territories at all. I think there is some ambiguity even in the pronoun "we" in this last sentence.

³¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Playful Acts of Imagination," *Liberal Education* 73/5:14-20.

³² Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map is Not Territory"

Now I never for an instant believe that any ambiguity that can be read in Smith's work is anything other than his own play and initiation of play, should we be attentive enough to be engaged by it. Nor is it of the form of riddle,³³ which suggests ambiguity only to be released by the solution. Smith's ambiguity is play in that it does not allow exit. Like Jorge Borges, he seamlessly and transparently shifts frames back and forth between "religion" and the "study of religion" incorporating them both in playful acts, while at once suggesting that this play is somehow impossible.

I think it important to ask to what extent Smith explicitly articulates play as distinctive to his work and to his study of religions. He does not label the third map as "play," but rather leaves it unnamed. The description he provides of this third map, as joke or disjunction or incongruity,³⁴ seems certainly akin to the motivation of play. While he describes religion as application as the play of fit and non-fit, he does not go on to raise "play" as anything particularly distinctive or as the articulation of a type of dynamic or process. He reads Frazer as *homo ludens*, but this explicitness in reference to play seems not to have gone much beyond his dissertation. Curiously, in the autobiographical narrative in "When the Chips Are Down," Smith barely mentions his dissertation and when he does so suggests that he was interested in the problem of comparison and that Frazer was the wrong choice because he had no comparative method.³⁵ I personally find Smith's dissertation of enormous interest and to be foundational to his powerful academic method. Smith speaks of maps rather than mappings or, as I have suggested I'd prefer, as mapping strategies. And his concluding phrase "maps are all we possess" appears to end play in some senses. So it appears that Smith's writing style and approach may be characterized as play, while he does not explicitly develop the category/term "play" in his work. His more explicit constructions cluster around such terms as: difference, incongruity, comparison, application, taxonomy, translation. This concern deserves far greater consideration.

Smith's exemplification of play through the very fabric of his writing reminds me of Jacques Derrida's statements on play in his "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. 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.³⁶

One of the things I find difficult to understand is our academic persistence toward ending play, closing the world, limiting our subjects, to all but the locative, the objective, although helpful is Johnson's work

³³ Although as the title of his dissertation reflects, Smith understood Frazer in terms of riddle. For a further discussion of riddle, see my *Brain Body Movement* "Lecture 13 "Thought and Cognition" www.Sam-Gill.com

³⁴ Or Incongruity as Robert's has it, p. 85.

³⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, "When the Chips Are Down" in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), p. 9.

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, pp 278-294

that shows how determined our thoughts and feelings are by our sensorimotor schemas. I don't understand why, in the world in which we live, we would gain anything by overlooking the playful, negotiative, profound, provocative aspects of the lives of our subjects or indeed of our own lives. In my study of play I have read my way from the writings of Schiller, to Peirce, to Gadamer, to Bateson, to Merleau-Ponty, to Derrida, to Baudrillard³⁷ and, while these scholars, whose writings span more than three centuries, offer a variety of interests and perspectives, I believe they are all endeavoring to articulate positions that are in important respects synonymous with play. Derrida goes even further to suggest that we cannot even place ourselves so as to choose between play and not play.³⁸ I have found Derrida's term "structurality" more generic and useful than flesh or seduction or *différance* or *speiltrib* or even play. All of these writers see that there is no possibility or interest in either a locative or utopian perspective; no sense in resolving a dual structurality to a single position. All these scholars show the amazing richness of the dynamics of process and the never-ending oscillation of a profoundly structured play.

I love it when Merleau-Ponty actually describes his flesh ontology as the "ultimate truth." One reason I love this so much is that Merleau-Ponty rejects the strategy I think common to much postmodern writing to infinite ambiguation and regression. To my reading, most surely naïve, this strategy is but a very tedious way of saying that ambiguity is the "ultimate truth." What we have difficulty grasping is that to proclaim something as the ultimate truth is but a phase in play, and a necessary one. Religions can be understood as playful in that their statements of ultimate truth are necessary in the range of contexts, actions, and processes that characterize the play of religions. Without statements of truths there is nothing to interpret and negotiate in the acts of living the religious life. And likewise with scholarship. We must have a locative (or a utopian, for they are but two sides of the same coin) moment (yet never more than a moment) in the full playful process of the academic life.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone shows that "We literally discover ourselves in movement. We make sense of ourselves in the course of movement."³⁹ We also create and determine ourselves in the practiced limitation of movement. A strong statement, easily dismissible if not the subject of derision, but I believe there is abundant evidence, drawn from neuroscience as well as philosophy, to support it. There is a primacy to human self-actuated movement as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone demonstrates⁴⁰ and movement is inseparable from play, seduction, flesh, perception, comparison, metaphor, language, art, ritual, life.⁴¹ To hold that religion or the study of religion can be characterizable as anything other than play is quite frankly naïve; or perhaps better put, is the product of the conditioning of an overly sedentary lifestyle that disdains movement. From our earliest days of formal learning we are told to sit down and be quiet. We are told to use our heads. We identify bodily activity with recess or sport, not learning. Learning is reading and writing. Speaking, which is bodily involved, is interestingly limited.

³⁷ see my "The Powerful Play Goes On: Friedrich Schiller to Jean Baudrillard on Play" 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com

³⁸ See the final paragraph of his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

³⁹ Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For much fuller development of these ideas see my "Brain Body Movement Lecture Series" 2009 www.Sam-Gill.com.

Learning is not only word centered; it is almost exclusively word. As we progress in learning to “higher” education, the frame narrows and the disembodied patterns are more strongly enforced. The patterns, qualities, values of learning are built through the limited movement of eyes on words and, now, index fingers on mice. Graduation exercises, our largest and most widely accepted and practiced public rituals, show in the very costumes (not incidentally indistinguishable from liturgical garments) the limitation to the head of the significant body and rendering the rest of the body inarticulate. Kyphosis is the academic posture. We don’t understand ourselves as playful nor our subjects as playful nor our methods as playful because we don’t move our bodies. It is not that we do not discover ourselves through movement; it is that we have discovered ourselves as learning and meaning-making creatures through the explicit limitation of movement.

Given that I argue for the inescapable determining impact of body, particularly the self-actuated moving body, on theory perception and meaning, this is a good point to consider how the view I have put forward compares with Mark Taylor’s. I am not nearly as familiar with Taylor’s work as I am with Smith’s, so I cannot adequately place the views presented in his article “Refiguring Religion” in the broader context of his work. As I understand him, Taylor has been powerfully influenced by his studies of new media, information technologies, information theory, complexity theory, economics, and biological sciences. And, of course, he is deeply influenced by postmodern theory, especially Derrida, and western philosophy. The focus of his discussion is the structurality he labels “the virtual” which he describes as “far from merely imaginary or unreal, the virtual is the elusive matrix through which all possibility and actuality repeatedly emerge.”

With the Internet a solid exemplar of Taylor’s system, he focuses on networks, systems, complex adaptive systems, where everything is related and entwined with everything else and no one is in charge or has control. Taylor arrives at an understanding of religion markedly different from the quotidian view of religion scholars. “Religion in an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate every stabilizing structure.”⁴² For Taylor then, religion is not anything people do or think, it is the interconnectivity, the matrix, “the emergent complex adaptive system” that both creates human feelings and human ways of acting as well as perturbs them, provides drama and lack of fit. This particularly contemporary understanding of religion is then set in a much longer history by Taylor to show the deep intellectual roots of its emergence as well as in the contemporary discourses of complexity theory and biology. Taylor is, to my reading, constructing something much broader than an understanding of religion and religion theory, he is describing an ontology. “In a webby world, nothing is clear, distinct, fixed or stable. Absolutely nothing—nothing absolute.”⁴³ In his view, everything is becoming increasingly interrelated and importantly, he holds that increased connectivity correlates with a decrease in stability, security, and certainty. Religion is but one arena of identifiable schemata and patterns of perturbation.

⁴² Quoted in “Refiguring Religion” from *After God*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 117.

It is interesting to me that Taylor and I seem to have moved in nearly opposite directions, he to the global virtual and I to the body, yet the differences are close enough to engage important discourse. As my work has moved increasingly to the workings of the brain/mind/body/movement, I have become increasingly interested in brain and proprioceptive systems and, while physiologically and neurologically based, I can recognize in these body systems a fractal of Taylor's emergent networks as he surely would predict. The brain has, after all, been shown to be perhaps the most complex system in the universe. While proprioception and visceral perception have yet to receive enough attention, they are clearly of a similar order of complexity. My focus on the body suggests that it is the emergent complex adaptive network of systems within (the body), in interaction with the emergent complex adaptive systems without that distinguishes us as human beings, both human beings who are religious and human beings who study religion and, of course, other things. The difficulty I have with Taylor's system is that it is conceptualized at the order of the virtual dimension of global operative systems. This is more like a network dynamic and I don't see where humans or religions or cultures necessarily play a role or experience an affect any greater than or different from any other bit of information. This idea seems to me to risk human beings becoming simply nodes of information. I hold with Taylor in seeing religion as a "matter of aesthetic intuition rather than knowledge (theory) or morality (practice),"⁴⁴ but there is no discussion of how something like aesthetic intuition, surely a human attribute, might operate in an emergent complex adaptive system. It may well be my human romantic sensorimotor programming that grounds my, otherwise baseless, hope that humans be something more distinctive than nodes of information. Quite frankly my fear is that in Taylor's focus on the virtual, we will continue the trend toward confining the body to only those parts that are information portals that connect us with the network. We are heading this way now as children are increasingly hardwired to these emergent informational network systems and less involved with full bodied play and life. As I have suggested that it is the limited bodily experiences of our forefathers that have led to the narrowness of our perceived worlds, Taylor's virtual network I believe strengthens and narrows the slot through which we know the world. It remains true that our bodies continue to determine our world, but in our increasing restriction of self-actuated movement to the minimum required to engage an information portal we are restricting ourselves to a tiny dimension of our bodily capability and consequently we are decreasing what we actually perceive as the world.

I found myself thinking a great deal about the future of the academic study of religion last spring teaching a graduate class "Brain Body Movement." While I am admittedly quite far out of the loop in the academic study of religion, it seems from Roberts's essay, confirmed by Taylor's, that there is a tendency toward the locative position in the understanding of the study of religion.

The current economic crisis impacts the academic world most immediately with budget cuts that result in fewer program options, seized up growth, pay freezes or cuts, and a broad sense of dis-ease or discomfort. Educational budget crises have been pretty common for several decades. They always seem to pass, but this time there is a settling into the acceptance that this crisis is going to last quite some time and, more significantly, that it will result in basic structural changes to the academy. It seems

⁴⁴ Ibid., 116.

that these realizations are met with a sort of numb resignation. Doubtless most academics see themselves continuing to do what they were trained to do and what their mentors did for the last couple of centuries. I don't believe this is going to be an option. Yet, I am excited about this crisis precipitating an opportunity for much needed change. I believe that on the heels of this economic crisis will come a crisis that will make this one seem miniscule; that is, the complex of crises related to global warming. Mark Taylor has a similar concern about our future.⁴⁵ At my age I have been deeply regretting that I won't be around for this crisis ... I really want to be. But with the accelerating pace of this oncoming events, I may well still be here.

However the future unfolds, I think the academy can no longer continue with the expectation that business will go on as usual. New PhDs today will be retiring, although I doubt that such a thing will then still exist, around 2050 or 40 years from now. If we place this in perspective we might look back and see how the world has changed in the last 40 years ... a time correlating roughly with the beginning of my career. No computers, no internet, no cell phones, no Facebook, no Twitter, no Google, no Wikipedia, no e-commerce, no e-anything, space travel just beginning. A recent *The Atlantic* reminded us that Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen argued that geologists should refer to the last two centuries as the "anthropocene" period because in that time humans have reshaped about half the earth's surface.⁴⁶ The term "anthropocene" period suggests that change has occurred during the last two centuries at a pace rivaling whole ages spanning tens of thousands of years in the past and, more to the point, that this change has occurred at the instigation of human beings. To name the age may also be to suggest its pending conclusion.

Yet, how has education changed? I heard recently that primary and secondary education have changed very little in method during the past century. We are due, in fact long overdue, for major changes in everything about education at all levels. I think it clear that those areas in education will simply not survive that do not change in ways and at rates that correspond with the change in the world around us. How can they? Why should they? We must see this as a time of great opportunity, as a time of creativity and excitement. But only if we are willing. I tell my students that if they expect to simply continue on throughout their careers very much in the same way that they are currently doing academics, the same way I do academics, they should plan on a short career. If they are interested; if they are creative and imaginative; if they have courage and boldness ... then they are well positioned to chart a new and exciting future for their field of study, for the entire academy. And what that will look like none of us can really imagine right now.

Trying to place the study of religion (the academy) in the future as it surely will unfold in the next ten to fifty years, I think our agenda and our methods must be quite different from what they now are. Our current concern with how the academic study of religion is distinguished from theology, our issues of the locative versus playful character of religion, our concerns with distinguishing ourselves as academics from our subjects, all seem to me, when I think of rising sea levels and expansive shifts in ecology, more on the order of snits than anything of great importance. It seems to me that we are so eager to try to

⁴⁵ Taylor, p. 118.

⁴⁶ Graeme Wood, "Moving Heaven and Earth" *The Atlantic* July/August, 2009, p. 70.

find something that we might use to distinguish ourselves that we might simply continue what we do, that we aren't looking adequately forward, we aren't stepping up to the exciting possibilities offered by the almost inevitable challenges we will face in the lifetimes of our current students and junior colleagues. It seems to me that the entire academy is expecting that business as usual will return, that learning and teaching and education will long continue to have the same character it currently has, which is little changed for the last century or more. The transformation of the general popular understanding of education toward information and information processing that has occurred in the last twenty years has transformed education even as institutions of higher learning have remained more or less the same. Most of us religion scholars are doing something very similar to what our teachers did 30 or 40 or 100 years ago. I can't see even a remote possibility that our students will be doing what we are now doing 30 or 40 years from now ... 2050. I can't imagine that we would even want them to. I'm poorly informed, but I don't know of any discussion of how we might completely reinvent the study of religion, indeed the entire academy, for mid-twenty-first century. If we miss this opportunity, this challenge, the study of religion will not survive.

While considering these concerns with my students last spring, they asked me "So what might this future study of religion look like?" At that point I told them that they are surely the ones who should determine that. Well, I thought this was a good thing to say because, as Thomas Kuhn showed, paradigm shifts, and I think this is precisely what I envision needed, occur usually between generations. Yet, having thought more about their question, recalling their deer-in-the-headlights look, and spurred on a bit by Roberts's article, I think that those of us who are senior in the field need to speak up all we can. Perhaps we cannot see so creatively because of our lived paradigms and our visceral perceptions, yet perhaps describing our fumbling imaginations may spur our younger colleagues and our students to more creatively imagine us anew.

Here are my imaginings:

First, I think that the restriction of religion (by our academic practices if not our definitions) to the literate elite and to the enduring writings must be complemented by a robust consideration of the living and practice of religions. Surely we have been relatively unimaginative in how to consider religious practices, processes, life. We meekly relegate this aspect of religion to anthropology and sociology. I believe a critical process in opening ourselves to something beyond texts, beyond literacy, involves changing our own academic lifestyle to create the sensorimotor schemas that will literally allow us to see and perceive our subjects quite differently. We must change ourselves materially to change how we engage and perceive our subjects. I recognize how resistant current sedentary academics will be to these ideas; how laughable and humorous such an idea will be seen by most, but then I think the future of the academy is actually at stake and hinges on how this concern is addressed.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ For a great deal more information on this idea see my lecture series "Brain Body Movement" www.Sam-Gill.com. I have also explored in some depth the impact certain forms of movement have on human development in an article "SalsAmigos: Teens Dancing Health and Happiness" www.SalsAmigos.org 2007, a book *Dancing the Rhythms of Life* www.Sam-Gill.com. 2009, and a series of six video lectures "SalsAmigos Dance Project" www.SalsAmigos.org.

Second, and to return to Roberts's article and the issue of play, I believe that we must find a way to not only articulate a structurality that will allow the study of religion and our conception of religion to surpass the narrow-mindedness of the locative and objective and to also transform our studies, including our writing conventions, into the application of this structurality. I have challenged my writing students to explore ways of writing about how a particular cultural or historical or religious situation gives rise to or presents oscillatory play; to comprehend how certain religious and cultural dynamics allow no satisfactory final resolution; and to present this comprehension in all its indeterminate richness rather than for them to force some sort of definitive conclusion; to look at dynamics, energetics, structuralities rather than claims to objective meanings and resolving interpretations and defensible conclusions. I don't think we have begun to imagine this process.

Thirdly, we are blinded, I believe, to anything being possibly significant or of value that is not based on production, making, meaning, meaning-making. The total focus on education today is on measures and standards, a quantification of production. I think the assumptions behind these perspectives need to be carefully and deeply rethought. I am much inspired by Baudrillard's vision that there is and must be a seductive source and an ongoing fabric whose value is prior to and necessarily other than meaning and production. I have explored dancing as an important example of a form of self-actuated human movement that exemplifies what I believe Baudrillard was imagining as "seduction."⁴⁸ There is then the play among production and seduction. I believe that the exploration of the dynamics of seduction/production will inspire our refiguring of religion and the academy.

Finally, once we have given up exclusion of all but texts and intellectual or historical materials and concerns; once we have begun to recognize the enormous determinacy of white, male, sedentary, intellectual, Christian scholars on the foundations of our cognition and perception and reason; once we begin to explore dynamics and energetics and structuralities; once we appreciate the interplay of seduction and production; once we become again self-actuated full-bodied moving beings; once we reclaim the importance of feeling, emotion, visceral perception; then all our academic methods and our understandings of religion and even our educational architecture and furniture will profoundly shift. I doubt we will make one whit of progress toward reinventing ourselves and religion without these process changes.

⁴⁸ Gill, "Dancing as Making" www.Sam-Gill.com. 2009