
All Work and No Play: Chaos, Incongruity and *Différance* in The Study of Religion

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The last two decades have been fascinating and productive ones for theorists of religion. Recent work has offered a remarkably wide range of theoretical perspectives and possibilities that enrich our field even as they plunge us into vigorous theoretical debates. Amidst this contest—even confusion—some basic principles for guiding future work seem to be asserting themselves. Many think that, after a century of confusion and intermingling between theology and the study of religion, scholars of religion are finally in a position to establish the study of religion on properly academic, theoretical foundations. In this story Eliade’s antireductionist discourse of the “sacred” becomes the epitome and, it is hoped, the last gasp of religious studies as a quasi-theological discourse. Yet despite their efforts to guide the study of religion away from Eliade, many remain Eliadan insofar as they accept Eliade’s “locative” approach to religion. Yet is it really “theology” that is currently limiting the way we “imagine religion,” or might it be instead the refusal to think beyond religion’s locative function—a refusal very closely linked to the desire for academic respectability in a historicist age? Mark C. Taylor’s *After God* provocatively disturbs the idea that religion is primarily locative and, in doing so, also disturbs the boundaries between the theological and the theoretical, religion and the study of religion. I consider the significance of this virtual map of religion, by reading *After*

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God with and against J. Z. Smith's early reflections or experiments with the ideas of chaos, incongruity, and location. I argue that Taylor's book leads us back to paths from which Smith turned in his early work.

But when we thus complain that some illicit religiosity—which may be by nature dogmatic and hegemonic—seems to be inhabiting academic discourse with impunity, do we understand our condition adequately?

Tomoko Masuzawa (2005: 328)

THE LAST TWO DECADES have been fascinating and productive ones for theorists of religion. Numerous volumes published during this period have revisited the theoretical work of past giants in the field, have promised to “guide” our work by defining the most important “terms” for studying and “thinking” about religion, and have elaborated new theoretical perspectives on religion.¹ Together, these volumes offer a remarkably wide range of theoretical perspectives and possibilities that enrich our field even as they plunge us into vigorous theoretical debates. Amidst this contest—even confusion—some basic principles for guiding future work seem to be asserting themselves. Most scholars of religion, for example, seem to agree that we still need to establish clear boundaries between the study of religion as an enterprise of the “secular” academy, on the one hand, and “religion” as the object of this study, on the other.² It is no surprise, then, to find in a number of recent volumes a narrative of the field that goes something like this: after a century of confusion and intermingling between theology and the study of religion that produced a mongrel discourse that was too Protestant, scholars of religion are finally in a position to establish the study of religion on properly academic, theoretical foundations.³ In this story, one of the paradigms for the study of religion dominant in the late-twentieth century, Eliade's antireductionist discourse of the “sacred” becomes the epitome and, it is hoped, the last gasp of religious studies as a quasi-theological discourse.

Given this point of general agreement it is worth noting that despite their efforts to guide the study of religion away from Eliade-style

¹ See, among others, Braun and McCutcheon (2000), Deal and Beal (2004), Jensen and Rothstein (2000), McCutcheon (2007), Strenski (2006), Taylor (1998).

² See Roberts' “Exposure and Explanation” (2004).

³ See, among others, Lincoln (2000), Masuzawa (2005), Orsi (2005), Wassertstrom (1999), Wiebe (2000).

theologizing, many in the new generation of theorists remain Eliadan, in at least one crucial respect: they embrace the “locative” map of religion that J. Z. Smith identified at the heart of Eliade’s work. Religion, on this view, places us, or, to use a more current way of making the same point, religion is a discourse of “social formation.” Of course, for those who see religion as social formation we are not placed, as in Eliade, by means of sacred heirophanies but through discourses in which human values and preferences are constructed as divine and so claim more-than-human authority. This emphasis on the locative function of religion, however, leads theorists to a particular way of thinking about the distinction between religion and the study of religion that we might usefully question as we reflect on how we will “imagine religion” in the future: is it really “theology” that is currently limiting the way we “imagine religion,” or might it be instead the refusal to think beyond religion’s locative function—a refusal I think is very closely linked to the desire for academic respectability in a historicist age?

I’ll do this by considering a new entry into these theoretical contests, Mark C. Taylor’s *After God*. Taylor claims in this book to be “theorizing religion” though it must be noted at the start that the book pays little, if any, direct attention to recent theoretical work in the study of religion. This is disappointing, a major lacuna in a book that I think should be taken seriously by theorists in the field. As I read it, *After God* provocatively disturbs the idea that religion is primarily locative and, in doing so, also disturbs the boundaries between the theological and the theoretical, religion and the study of religion. For Taylor, religion is always both “figuring” and “disfiguring” the maps we use to order our lives, working on the boundaries of order and disorder. It is, in short, not locative, but “virtual.” To consider the significance of this virtual map of religion, in what follows I contextualize *After God* by reading it with and against J. Z. Smith’s early reflections or experiments with the ideas of chaos, incongruity, and location. I will argue that Taylor’s book leads us back to paths from which Smith turned in his early work.

I. J. Z. SMITH ON PLAY AND INCONGRUITY

Locating Religion

Willi Braun, in the introductory essay of *Guide to the Study of Religion*, argues for the importance of establishing the study of religion as a legitimate human science. Over the past forty years no one has done more for this project than J. Z. Smith. It is fitting, then, that

Braun attaches as an epigraph to his essay a passage from Smith's *Drudgery Divine*: "Lacking a clear articulation of purpose, one may derive arresting anecdotal juxtapositions of self-serving differentiations, but the disciplined constructive work of the academy will not have been advanced, nor will the study of religion come of age" (Braun 2000: 1). It is fitting, too, that after Durkheim, Freud, and Marx, no scholar is referred to more often in the *Guide* than Smith, and that many of these references are in the service of articulating a clear academic purpose for the study of religion. For some of the contributors to the volume this purpose is accomplished by theorizing religion as a particularly authoritarian, ideological force for what Burton Mack has called "social formation."⁴ This includes the volume's editors, Braun and Russell McCutcheon, so it is no surprise that Braun aligns Smith with Bruce Lincoln's definition of religious discourse as "an orientation to speak of matters transcendent ... and eternal ... 'with an authority equally transcendent and eternal'" (2000: 10). For Braun, Mack, Lincoln, and others, religion exerts this authority through the naturalization or mystification of contingent, historically constructed human categories and hierarchies. Religion, in other words, is an ideological discourse that seeks to place us, securely and authoritatively, in the world and cosmos. From this perspective, the study of religion comes of age, and is decisively distinguished from religion, only when it comes to see itself as a critical force for comprehending the mechanisms of this placement.⁵

But the editors of the *Guide* do make a place—at the margins, in the form of an "Epilogue"—for an essay that presents us with questions not asked and possibilities not offered by other contributors to the volume: Sam Gill's "Play." Most significantly, Gill's claim that both religion and the study of religion are forms of play disturbs the guiding opposition between religion and the study of religion. J. Z. Smith also plays a crucial role in this essay, as Gill's exemplar of *homo ludens*. At the heart of this reading of Smith is the concept of "incongruity," which Smith first treats at length in the essay "Map is Not Territory." There, Smith argues that we can distinguish three religious "mapping strategies" by which people try to "construct and inhabit [space in which to meaningfully dwell] through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation" (1998a: 285). In earlier essays, Smith had explored two of these strategies, the "locative" and "utopian"; in "Map is Not Territory," though, much of his attention is devoted to developing the

⁴ See Mack's contribution to *Guide to the Study of Religion*, entitled "Social Formation" and the important role that Smith plays in that essay.

⁵ For criticism of this approach to defining religion, see Roberts' "Rhetorics of Ideology" (2005).

idea of incongruity as a third mapping strategy. For Smith, locative and utopian maps try to overcome incongruity once and for all, the former by emphasizing place and the importance of everything having a place and the latter by rebelling against existing order in anticipation of a new world and a new order.⁶ But in “Map is not Territory,” Smith argues that in certain cases religions “delight” in “lack of fit,” or what he calls “incongruity.” Here, religion seems to work not by overcoming displacement or disjunction but by playing “between the incongruities” (1978: 309). In a later work on ritual, Smith will make the point about incongruity in a passage Gill quotes: “Ritual precises ambiguities; it neither overcomes nor relaxes them” (2000: 457).

Smith’s work on incongruity informs Gill’s view of play, which Gill defines as holding simultaneously two or more irreconcilable positions in a “dialogical structure” through which one “plays” between positions rather than seeking to overcome the differences between them (1998a: 284).⁷ “Play,” he writes, “is a boundary that presents alternatives governed by self-contradiction such that each leads to and negates the other in an apparent endless cycle” (2000: 454). This cycle is complex, perhaps more so than Gill acknowledges, for it involves two distinct movements of “oscillation.” The first is the oscillation between the two “positions.” The second is the more complex movement between this oscillating refusal to choose a position and the decision to rest with one or the other. This second movement is an oscillation between play and not-play, or, we might say, “meta-play.” As Gill points out, in “Map is Not Territory” Smith argues that both religion and the study of religion play, they both involve the “oscillatory and iterative negotiation of fit”—for example in the fit/non-fit between myth and myth-teller’s reality or in the fit/non-fit between the scholar’s “map” and religious reality or “territory.”

J. Z. Smith has convincingly shown that the meaning and vitality of place, myth and ritual (all of these are academically constructed analytic categories) is a result of the play of fit. Religion and its constituents, as Smith imagines them, involve the oscillatory and iterative negotiation of fit without final resolution. But the academic study of religion, while framing different concerns than do religions, gains its

⁶ This characterization of Smith’s “utopian” map contrasts with at least some of Smith’s own claims about it. I return to this issue below.

⁷ Gill also considers Smith and play in an earlier article, “No Place to Stand” (1998a). On the reading I develop here, “Play” recapitulates the main points of “Stand,” adds a few points that I will note, and, importantly, heightens the ambivalence about religion as play that I discuss below.

meaning and vitality *through the same process* (2000: 459, emphasis mine).

Gill's inclusion in the *Guide* is significant because although it is easy to imagine that the idea of the scholar as *homo ludens* would be attractive to the volume's contributors who theorize religion as social formation, the idea that religion is also a form of play would be far less so. For them, the most significant characteristic of religion is precisely that it does not play, that it is a form of social labor that eliminates incongruity and assigns everything a place.

On my reading, however, even Gill and Smith have trouble consistently affirming the play of religion, finding it necessary at times not just to map religion, but to secure their own scholarly mapping activity by opposing scholarly play to religious seriousness, piety, or even blindness. Thus Gill, at crucial points, appears to hold a view of religion much more in line with the theorists of social formation. Embracing Smith's claim that "map is not territory" and that scholars of religion "ultimately [have] no justifiable place to stand," Gill notes that, nevertheless, scholars do try to comprehend and order the world. The scholar must therefore play between comic and tragic views of the world, oscillating between the resolutions of knowledge and the knowledge that such resolutions can never be final. This would be an example of what I designated above as "meta-play." And it is precisely at this most delicate, most uncertain point, that Gill finds the need to make a clear distinction between religion and the study of religion. In "Stand," he puts it this way: "To take a stance, in this complex multi-cultural world, *without* recognizing its absurdity is either religious, narrow-minded, or naïve. To refuse to take any stance at all is either to indulge in infinite regress, a favorite of many post-modernists, or silence. The alternative, which is at least more interesting, is the perspective of play: seriously taking a stance while acknowledging its absurdity" (306, emphasis mine). Here, it appears that religion and the study of religion play differently, as Gill uses familiar rhetorical and conceptual strategies to distinguish between, on the one hand, religion and the lack of self-consciousness one finds in the narrow-minded and naïve and, on the other hand, the self-aware, resolute yet playful scholar. Later in this piece, Gill compares the humor of novelist Milan Kundera with the playful storytelling of the scholar and quotes—approvingly—Kundera's claim that "religion and humor are incompatible" (1998a: 308). In the *Guide* essay, Gill again describes religion as a kind of narrow-mindedness and naivete and writes that "The academic study of religion has a play structurality in that doing it always also involves the meta-message 'this

is academic not religious’—to be ‘religious’ would be to identify with one of the alternative positions that engage the academic study of religion and would therefore negate any possibility of being engaged by the play structurality—signaling a passage through a boundary of paradox very like that of play” (458). Is it that “religion” negates play structurality altogether, or is it only that academic playfulness is more intense, more self-conscious, is “meta-play”? Is Gill claiming that although religious people play, they do not see themselves at playing, do not understand that their religious maps are not territories, while the scholar of religion understands not only that religious people play but that they themselves, as they map religion, also are playing? And is it precisely in this difference that the study of religion gains its power to illuminate? If so, perhaps Gill’s essay in the *Guide* is, with respect to the other essays in the volume, less marginal than it appears.⁸

Smith at Play

Scholarly playfulness has long been a hallmark of J. Z. Smith’s writing. Take the opening paragraphs of “Map is Not Territory” where Smith, for whom the operations of classification and comparison are at the heart of all thought, opens by reflecting on his own classification, in the University of Chicago’s Faculty Directory, as a “historian.” The historian, he contends, has “no place to stand” when studying human history, only fabricated, ultimately arbitrary starting points. By contrast, Smith avers, the “theologian” claims to think from a given Archimedean point, a Beginning or Origin. This is a version of the stark dichotomy between religion and the study of religion that later guides the work of scholars like Bruce Lincoln and Willi Braun. Smith, however, complicates this comparison by drawing a second one and invoking a different religious figure, the pilgrim: “Like the pilgrim, the historian is obliged to approach his subject obliquely. He must circumambulate the spot several times before making even the most fleeting contact” (1978: 290). What does this comparison do to the dichotomy between theology and study of religion with which Smith begins? Is it meant simply to stress the need for humility and modesty on the part of the scholar, or is there a suggestion here that the scholar might also need the sense of

⁸ But, as I have said, Gill does seem ambivalent about this issue and in other writings expresses a point of view that questions this strategy of defining the play of the study of religion over against religion. In the conclusion to *Storytracking*, for instance, he draws some distinctions between religion and the study of religion but then warns against assuming that “we can understand [our religious subjects], even if they cannot even imagine what we are talking about as we do so” (1998b: 215).

awe or reverence with which many pilgrims approach their destination? Not surprisingly, Smith does not take us down this road but with one last comparison moves in a more worldly direction, quoting James Joyce to compare the historian/pilgrim with the lover who draws back from the “object of his attention” after only the lightest of touches, leaving it “intact.”⁹

So the historian knows that map is not territory, and the pilgrim at least knows that he or she can only get so close to the object of devotion, but the theologian, like the Eliadan scholar of religion, believes that he or she can grasp the heart of reality and gain an eternal point of view. Who, for Smith, stands in for “religion” here, the theologian or the pilgrim? To consider this question, I want to explore briefly a number of the early essays that Smith collected in the volume that bears the title of its closing essay *Map is Not Territory*. In these essays, we find Smith exploring a variety of religious mapping strategies. Although his work on the strategy of “incongruity” especially in the title essay, has had the most impact on his later work, and on scholars such as Gill, it is worth considering the other paths and possibilities that Smith marks out in these essays.¹⁰

I begin with the essays “The Wobbling Pivot” and “The Influence of Symbols upon Social Change,” both of which consider how religious traditions work with ideas of order and place. “The Wobbling Pivot” is one of Smith’s most pointed efforts to come to terms with the legacy of Eliade. Central to this legacy, of course, is Eliade’s opposition between the sacred and the profane. Smith wants us to rethink this opposition. To begin, he suggests that we think about sacred and profane in terms of order and chaos and even claims that Eliade’s most well-known book could be entitled *The Sacred and the Chaotic* (91). He also argues that chaos should not be viewed as the opposite of the sacred but rather as part of the sacred, as itself “a sacred power.” So, where Eliade stresses the importance for *homo religiosus* of repeating ordinary acts of creation in which the sacred is identified with the order imposed on chaos,

⁹ Compare Willi Braun: “Researching the world we live in ... is always a complex exercise of selecting, inventing, and fiddling with categories in order to render—to force—the natural world and the range of human doings as intelligible, differentiated, ours to respond to, to make and remake” (2000: 3).

¹⁰ Reading these essays in the context of their placement in a single volume, I want to avoid imposing a single argument or trajectory on Smith’s thinking about scholarly maps, though such a reading is not, I think, completely unwarranted. Instead, I simply want to point to the series of possibilities for religion as a mapping activity that Smith illuminates in the various essays and to suggest that although the essay “Map is not Territory” as well as Smith’s later work, especially in the volume *To Take Place*, focuses on one of these possibilities it is worth our while, today, to retrieve some of the others that in my view have been neglected.

Smith—as ever wanting to think religion historically and as an encounter with history—stresses chaos as an integral element of the process by which order is created. Chaos, resisting and threatening existing sacred orders, is embodied in religious tricksters and reformers such as shamans and prophets (97); furthermore, chaos, in contrast to certain theological visions such as *creatio ex nihilo*, is for Smith “never, in myths, finally overcome” (97). Smith pushes us here to recognize that the sacred is constituted through a dynamic relation, a difficult tension between order and chaos. Human beings yearn for order and stability, and take steps to assure themselves and others that they have it, yet they must change and adapt. We might ask, then, how religious traditions might think or imagine this type of chaos?

In “Symbols,” though, Smith seems to indicate that this is the wrong question to ask. Beginning with the premise that “the question of the character of the place on which one stands is the fundamental symbolic and social question” (141), Smith argues for the importance of distinguishing between a “locative” vision in which everything has its place and a “utopian” vision that values “no-place,” in which the sacred is identified with freedom and transcendence. This distinction, he says, helps us understand the radical reevaluation of the cosmos that took place during the Hellenistic period in which structures of order came to be seen as oppressive and tyrannical and the promise of another world of freedom and openness, even the chaos of the “vast” and “boundless,” became the goal of religious transcendence (134). Yet, I don’t think Smith clearly explains just how, exactly, the utopian differs from the locative, for there are at least three, quite different, conceptions of utopia at work in the essay. First, Smith suggests that some religious traditions celebrate utopia in the most literal sense, as “no-place.” This involves a celebration of movement, boundlessness, and rootlessness, as his invocations to Alexander the Great and the American cowboy suggest (141). In this, we find a religious view fundamentally at odds with the locative orientation of Eliade. Second, Smith offers a less radical notion of utopia in the discussion of Hellenistic religion. There it seems that transcendence involves not so much freedom from place and limit per se but rather an escape from a false order toward a new, true home, the “world-beyond-this-world which is [the] *true place*” (140, emphasis mine). Finally, in a more general theoretical move with which he concludes the essay, Smith appeals to Victor Turner to claim that the “descent into chaos” is a liminal moment in “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” (146). But this view of the utopian

leaves us with “structure,” “world,” “status”: all terms of place and order. Moreover, this is not even necessarily a new place or a new order, but rather the old order “strengthen[ed].” By the last lines of the essay, a passage from Suzanne Langer, Smith appears very far removed from the “no place” of the vast and boundless: “man can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos” (146). And we seem even further removed from the need to consider a non-Eliadan way to think about chaos.

In two other essays from *Map is Not Territory*, however—“Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?” and “Good News is No News”—Smith offers a more unsettling perspective on place and order. In “Birth,” he again invokes Turner’s conception of liminality as “punctual, limited experiences which form part of a highly structured scenario of existence, of birth and rebirth, of creation, order and chaos” (150). Working again with materials from the Hellenistic period, specifically the Gnostic view that “all structures of order [are] evil” (151) and the upside-down crucifixion of Peter, much of the essay reiterates the central points Smith makes in “Symbols.” Yet this essay ends on a much different note. Rather than domesticating the idea of the transcendence of the world’s order with a Turnerian appeal to liminality, Smith considers as a possible religious goal not just escape from the “constricted confines of one’s place” but an “absolute freedom” where “liminality becomes the supreme goal rather than a moment in a rite of passage” (170).

This non-Turnerian conception of liminality is developed further in “Good News is No News,” the essay where Smith first treats the “rhetoric of incongruity” (206). Reflecting on and reshaping the category of “gospel,” he focuses on narratives that feature bewilderingly paradoxical figures such as Apollonius and Jesus, who are simultaneously opaque and transparent. Gospel, as Smith reconstructs it, “play[s] between various levels of understanding and misunderstanding” by portraying a central figure that “play[s] with our seriousness and is most serious when he appears to be playing” (194). Such figures appear to disciples and opponents alike as riddles that upset established categories. They are revelatory, but on Smith’s reading, what they reveal is “enigma” (205). Gospel—and by the end of the essay he is making it a claim about “myth” as such—stresses the uncertainty of the riddle or the joke, the “play in-between” two different things as opposed to their resolution in a new order. The point seems to be neither the overthrowing of the existing order, as in utopian rebellion, nor the move, through liminality, to a new order. Rather, we have an example of what in the discussion of Gill I called “meta-play” or even what we might describe

as a kind of deconstructive play, that is, an encounter with incongruity that leads to an awareness of the contingency of all order. Smith compares myth to the “joke” or the “riddle” by arguing that each of these genres plays with the discrepancy between understanding and misunderstanding in a manner that produces “delight.” Here, then, in contrast to the Eliadan sense that chaos is threatening, we find a view of disorder, lack of fit, incongruity, as providing an opportunity for frivolity and delight, and, as Smith puts it, “freedom, transcendence, and play.”

To understand the implications of Smith’s somewhat sketchy conclusion to this essay, which I don’t believe he ever fully unpacks, we can contrast such “delight” to other possible religious responses to the enigma of “gospel,” or, more generally, to the ways in which a myth does not “fit.” First, one might decide that the myth is no longer useful, that a change to a new order is needed. This seems to be the perspective of Smith’s “utopia.” A second possibility would be what Smith calls “application”: the adaptation of myth or the tradition to new circumstances, a revision, though not an overthrowing of the old order. This will be the direction Smith takes in “Map is not Territory” as he refines his concept of “incongruity.” But in the conclusion to “Good News,” Smith focuses on what seems to me to be a distinct, third possibility, on “delight” as a response to “no fit.” In “delight,” one does not reject one order for another, revise an old order, or imagine a final state of no order, but rather—and here the “joke” is crucial—relativizes all order as in some sense contingent or at least ungraspable by finite human beings. This involves the recognition of a certain absurdity, to use Gill’s term—it is an example of “meta-play.” Thus, where in “Symbol” Smith ended with Suzanne Langer on our inability to deal with chaos, in “Good News” he ends with Mary Douglas’s reflections on the joke: “The joke affords opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general” (206–7).

To view such meta-play as a *religious* response to the failure of our maps to fit our world and our experience, is a radical idea, especially today when so many scholars define religion in terms of locative social labor. It also is an idea that Smith will not develop much further in writings subsequent to “Good News.” Indeed, when Smith offers his most extensive discussion of “incongruity,” in the essay “Map is Not Territory,” not only is the social labor of religion at the heart of his discussion, but despite his own stated intentions, Smith subordinates the category of incongruity to religion’s locative function. The first half of

the “Map” does continue to stress themes such as playfulness (which Smith also enacts—recall the opening to the essay I described above) and joke. At the midpoint of the essay, Smith writes:

The normal expectation has been suspended and the unexpected intrudes relativizing all previous modes of thought. The practical joke (and this, after all, is what most initiations are whether they occur in primitive societies or in college fraternities) structurally resembles that sudden breakthrough which scholars of religion have termed an epiphany or hierophany. The tradition has been applied, and the problematics of its application function as a religious experience and as an occasion for thought (301–2).

This passage effectively summarizes “Good News,” but it also marks a fork in the road for Smith. In “Good News,” as in this passage, Smith treats incongruity, at least in significant part, in existential and metaphysical terms—such as “religious experience” and “transformation” and even “symbol”—that describe the encounter with “no fit” as throwing our maps and our worlds into question. Gospel, on Smith’s view, does not simply allow us to adjust our ordering of the world in light of new information or situations, but challenges our very conception of order and even hints at a more or less permanent upsetting of all order. This, I think, is Smith’s most pointed challenge to the idea that religion is primarily or exclusively locative. But in the second half of “Map,” Smith leaves behind the themes of joke, play, and freedom and urges us to think about myth from the intellectualist perspective on incongruity and application that will dominate his future work.¹¹ Here, myth is not an “exotic category of experience which escapes everyday modes of thought” but involves “the ordinary, recognizable features of religion as negotiation and application.” Smith supports this intellectualist orientation not only by ascribing “historical consciousness” and “critical rationality” to the “primitive” but also by asserting that these attributes are definitive of “being human” (297). From here, Smith can treat myth in terms of the incongruity between past and present and the

¹¹ In *Relating Religion*, Smith describes his career in terms of the “constant... argument that religion is not best understood as a disclosure that gives rise to a particular mode of experience. To the contrary, religion is the relentlessly human activity of thinking through a ‘situation,’ an understanding that requires assenting to Lévi-Strauss’s dictum, ‘man has always been thinking equally well’” (2004: 32). He also describes *To Take Place*, his book on ritual theory, as his “most sustained investigation of situational incongruity” (2004: 19). It is not possible to explore this fascinating text here, but it clearly continues the intellectualist and locative commitment to incongruity that I identify here. See (1987: 53, 84, 103, 109–10).

adaptation to new historical circumstances, effectively instrumentalizing myth as “application” and casting the religious actor as a kind of quasi-scientist who, in experimental fashion, applies the resources of religious tradition—particularly myth—to new and enigmatic circumstances. As he puts it, myth involves “a testing of the adequacy and the applicability of native categories to new situations and data . . . [which is] pre-eminently a rational and rationalizing enterprise, an instance of an experimental method . . . [a] science” (307–8).

Smith’s intellectualism domesticates his view of transcendence and effectively gives up his challenge to the locative paradigm: the rich, existentially inflected conception of transcendence that had been the focus of earlier essays has now been reduced to the process of adjusting our intellectual categories in order to better place ourselves. The encounter with incongruity, he says, “gives rise to thought.” Here, Smith borrows from Ricoeur, whose explorations of myth had led him to claim that “the symbol gives rise to thought” (1967: 347). But Smith and Ricoeur mean very different things by “thought.” Ricoeur’s theory of myth subordinates the “explicative” function of myth to the symbolic function whereby the equivocation or excess of symbolic language reveals to us existential—not a simple intellectual or instrumental—possibility. And, significantly, Ricoeur argues that this equivocation is constitutive of a *theological* hermeneutic of myth. Smith, however, distances himself decisively from Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of the symbol: “I expect that scholars of religion in the future will shift from the present Romantic hermeneutics of symbol and poetic speech to that of legal-exegetical discourse” (300). Rather than a fundamental existential and linguistic incongruity revealed first of all in the multivalence of meaning and reality, Smith emphasizes a “situational incongruity” (2004: 19) that does not fundamentally challenge the locative paradigm. By the end of the essay, incongruity is a means for reestablishing or revising order in the face of disruptions of order. This is not Eliade’s locative, for Smith does make the important point that religious people do recognize and acknowledge incongruity: they *apply* their traditions when they encounter incongruity, rather than ignoring incongruity by blindly conforming the present to, and so repeating an originary past. Incongruity does “give rise to thought,” it is not “thought away.” But it seems that this thinking, as rational application, is now, like the thinking of utopia, primarily a step toward reordering the world and finding a new place on which to stand.

What are we to make of Smith’s reflections on chaos and incongruity in “Wobbling Pivot,” “Good News,” and “Birth Upside Down”? Are they only experiments that Smith came to see, correctly perhaps, as

dead ends? And what of Smith's efforts to think beyond locative paradigms of religion? I have suggested that we read "Map", despite Smith's own claims, as supporting the idea that religion is fundamentally locative. If so, what does this suggest for efforts to articulate the difference between religion and the study of religion with respect to map and play? These will be the questions that guide my approach to Taylor's *After God* in the second half of this essay, but before turning to that task, I need to consider one further point. Sam Gill, as I noted, describes both religion and the study of religion as forms of play, but at crucial points asserts the playful character of the study of religion precisely by denying the playfulness of religion. Smith also asserts the parallels between religion and the study of religion, but by the time we get to "Map is not Territory," the crucial point of comparison is not play, but map-making. Yet, even as Smith stresses this parallel, he has already qualified it. Recall my discussion of the playful opening to the essay. Interestingly, this opening is a variation on the first paragraphs of "Symbols." There, Smith also writes about the historian and the pilgrim, stressing their similarities in much the same way, in many of the same words and sentences, as he does in "Map." But only in the later essay (written four years after "Symbols") does Smith introduce the theologian. This theologian does not play with his stance, does not move from place to place or even occupy a "no place." Rather, the theologian stands at the origin, at "The Beginning." Smith's theologian is like Eliade and like the religious people Eliade imagines: obsessed with beginnings, unable to acknowledge or play with incongruity. With this, Smith, draws a map with sharp boundaries between religion, as represented by the theologian, and the study of religion, represented by the historian. And, even when later in the essay he offers a map where this boundary is much less distinct, where perhaps we are dealing with pilgrims rather than theologians, the playfulness of the pilgrim's oblique approach to the object of worship is lost in the serious social labor of reordering the world so as to find a new place to stand.

This dichotomy between the theologian and the historian is far too simplistic.¹² Many contemporary "theologians" are quite self-conscious about their own religious mapping activity and move in sophisticated ways between religious commitments and practices, on the one hand, and historical and theoretical academic studies of religion, on the other. They are quite willing, with Smith the historian, to think critically and

¹² I make this argument in Roberts "Exposure and Explanation: On the New Protectionism in the Study of Religion" (2004).

self-consciously about where they stand. Where, then, do we draw the boundaries between religion and the study of religion? Smith does characterize his approach to incongruity in “Map,” and so the dichotomy between the theologian and the historian, as an “exaggeration in the direction of truth.” But then perhaps we should reflect on what might happen if we were to “exaggerate” in a different direction, for instance, by pursuing his earlier reflections on chaos and incongruity and considering how religious traditions think incongruity not as the social labor of reordering, but in terms of “frivolity,” or the opening to existential possibility, or the incongruity between place and no-place. What can we learn about myth and religion if we continue to exaggerate in the direction of the joke, of play, of chaos, instead of in the direction of “science” and place (308)?

PART II: *AFTER GOD*

As in some of his earlier books, Taylor’s *After God* works at the boundaries between theory and theology. One of the first to give Derrida’s deconstruction a theological inflection, Taylor traces the margins between theism and atheism in a way that disrupts this opposition and that—as indicated by the title of his major early work, *Erring*—questions the locative maps of most traditional theologies. Taylor’s deconstructive a/theology thus offers an interesting variation on the kind of play that Smith says “precises ambiguities.” More so than in his past work, however, *After God* seeks to theorize this play. Taylor’s new book can help us “exaggerate” in the direction of a non-locative, or, to use Taylor’s term, a “virtual” theory of religion.

Virtual Religion

At the center of the difference between a “locative” and a “virtual” theory of religion, for Taylor, is the concept of “disfiguring.” As he defines it,

[r]eligion is 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, and disfigure every stabilizing structure (2008: 12).

Insofar as it “figure[s] schemata” through which we find a meaningful place in the world, religion is locative. Taylor contends that these “schemata,” along with the numerous other schemata to which they are connected, are “figured” from out of the constant stream of “noise” in

which we are enmeshed, turning it into “information.” Taylor thinks about the relation between schemata and noise explicitly in terms derived from western religious and intellectual traditions, such as the relation between “Word” and the waters of chaos in Genesis, and between form and matter in Platonic philosophy. At the same time, he argues that the theory of complex adaptive networks that recently has come to inform intellectual work in numerous fields, such as biology and genetics, offers an advance on these traditions by allowing us to conceive order and chaos, form and matter, “figuring and disfiguring,” not as binary oppositions but as interdependent moments of process. “Order and disorder,” Taylor writes, “are not simply opposite but are codependent in such a way that neither can be what it is apart from the other.” Thus, schemata are “interrelated and mutually constitutive [and thus are not] eternal and unchanging ... but are emergent and evolve over time” (15). But as Taylor defines it, this interdependence is constitutive of religion. He thus issues a challenge to locative theories of religion: it is not that religion locates and that other natural or cultural forces, say history, dislocates, but rather that religion itself disfigures, dislocates. In this respect, Taylor differs from Smith’s view of incongruity in “Map” but is rather close to Smith’s earlier view, in “Wobbling Pivot,” of chaos as a “sacred power.”

To pursue this way of reading *After God*, it is necessary to think more generally about Taylor’s project. The book speaks usefully to our contemporary moment, in both global and academic terms. Regarding the former, Taylor’s theory responds to the global resurgence of religion and, in particular, to the rise of fundamentalism or what Taylor describes as “neo-foundationalism.” Taylor views this resurgence as an example of what he calls “religiosity,” which he thinks we have to distinguish from “religion.” Where the latter involves moments of stabilizing *and* destabilizing, “religiosity” responds to the threat of destabilization by desperately absolutizing a particular schema. In academic terms, Taylor stresses the need to think beyond the entrenched and stultifying opposition between what he calls—using these terms in a rather expansive sense—“structuralism” and “poststructuralism.” “Structuralism” includes not only approaches to religion that are structuralist in the technical sense of the term, such as Levi-Strauss’s, but also “phenomenological” theories such as Eliade’s that define religion in terms of unchanging, fundamental structures or essences. “Post-structuralist” theories, by contrast, reject such essences and in fact tend to eschew definitions altogether for fear of reinscribing such essences. Poststructuralism, Taylor argues, thus operates only in a critical mode, stressing for instance, genealogical exposure of the historical

contingencies at the heart of religious traditions. For Taylor, though, both approaches miss something crucial. "Structuralists understand the necessity of forms and patterns for creating the order without which life is impossible, but they cannot explain how these structures emerge and change over time ... [whereas] poststructuralists have a monolithic view of systems and structures and cannot conceive of structures that act as a whole without necessarily totalizing."

Weaving its way throughout *After God* is a fascinating genealogy that for Taylor indicates that structuralist and poststructuralist theoretical orientations are only the most recent manifestations of theological perspectives that have informed western thought for centuries. This genealogy is organized by the opposition between realism, or the "theology of the Word," and nominalism, or the "theology of the Deed." Where realism expresses itself in "foundational theories" that identify the ultimate structures of reality and seek to reduce all difference to identity (such as "structuralism"), nominalism asserts the contingency of such structures and the irreducibility of difference (as in poststructuralism). But for Taylor, realism and nominalism are ultimately not simple opposites but rather are dialectically related in the way indicated by his complexity theory: realist theories stabilize through the claim to foundational structures and nominalism destabilizes these structures. In response to the threat of "chaos" that is perceived when theologies or philosophies of contingency are strongest, realism expresses itself in "religiosity." But when the rigidity of such religiosity can no longer persuasively account for the complexity of reality, nominalism returns to the fore. Thus, neither realism nor nominalism, structure nor contingency is the last word, for each only focuses on particular *moments* that for Taylor together constitute the *process* of emergence.

This emphasis on process and emergence, in which figuring and disfiguring are linked in a "non-oppositional difference," leads Taylor to a conception of the real as "virtual," that is, to an ontology in which the real is neither present nor absent, neither actual nor possible but always emerging and always disappearing, always therefore incapable of placing us once and for all. Put differently, no given schema can ever grasp the "event" of its own emergence. Taylor argues that this eventuality of schemata is precisely what Derrida famously names *différance*: the temporalizing, differing "origin" of structure. "According to Derrida, structures are not eternal or permanent but are emergent. The eventuality of structure entails a strange temporality that dislocates every present and disrupts all presence ... this eventual emergency is the incomprehensible excess that decenters structures by repeatedly

displacing originary presence” (304).¹³ As Gill notes, Derrida’s *différance* marks the point of indecision, of back and forth, even of “absurdity,” in all conceptual systems, all maps. Taylor’s virtual theory of religion, therefore, insists that conceptions of God, the divine, or ultimate, only “place” us in this emergent sense: “God” can be thought only in the context of also thinking “after God.” Or, as Hent de Vries puts it: “That the absolute thus betrays itself, giving while withholding, retreating by showing ‘itself,’ might well be the condition, call it the transcendental grounding and uprooting, of all images and every picture” (2008: 15). And, we should add, of every map.

Différance, Play and the Absolute

Taylor’s *différance* is a variation on what Smith and Gill describe as “chaos” and “incongruity.” Unlike chaos, however, *différance* cannot be conceived as the opposite of order; and, unlike incongruity, or at least the “situational incongruity of ‘Map,’” it is never simply a historical contingency that “gives rise to thought,” that is, to a new map. Instead, *différance* is the remainder of the deconstruction of the opposition of chaos and order and is constitutive of the emergent character of our schema. Although *difference*, like incongruity, does issue “in creative transformation” (310), that is, in the production of new schemata or maps, it does so from within old schemata: this is what Taylor means by a nontotalizing sense of structure. Taylor supports this view by pointing to biological studies that apply complex network theory to genetic and bio-chemical processes, producing concepts such as “negen-tropy” and “dissipative structures,” both of which refer to “counterentropic tendencies ... at work in the cosmos” (322). In short, cutting edge theory in life sciences suggests that complex systems are self-organizing, that the introduction of disorder into such systems does not necessarily lead to entropy, but can lead to the emergence of new orders, and that such “disorder” results not just from changes in the parts of such systems, say through random mutation of genes or through environmental changes, but also from the whole working back on the parts. Theologically, therefore, Taylor thinks that we need to move beyond the idea that order is imposed upon chaos/nothingness and that chaos is always undermining order. Chaos, from Taylor’s

¹³ Taylor, of course, has long identified himself with the deconstructive, Derridean branch of poststructuralist theory. Here, though, he employs Hegel and complexity theory to reread Derrida beyond poststructuralism: the Derrida we find in *After God* is not simply a critic of all totalizing schemas, but someone who can help us articulate the possibility of nontotalizing religious and cultural structures.

perspective, is the “aleatory event [that] disturbs, disrupts, and dislocates patterns to create different figures that constitute” new orders (342). As such, it is the edge of creativity or what Taylor, in a nice turn of phrase, calls the “anticipatory wake” of process or differential play.

This brings us back to the question of how religion, according to Taylor, “disfigures every stabilizing structure.” In one sense, it should be obvious that sometimes religions destabilize themselves or other religious and cultural structures, for instance when a prophetic figure criticizes a religious establishment or when a “heresy” challenges an “orthodoxy.” These forms of destabilization, however, usually take place in the name of an alternative religious structure, and, as we see in Smith’s discussion of the “utopian,” usually functions to relocate rather than to dislocate.¹⁴ Alternatively, we might think about Taylor’s theory of religion in locative terms and so consider his theology of culture as a variant on Tillich’s: there is a religious element to all culture such that even if most religious people live lives that view the divine as ordering and stabilizing, “religion” continues to work in the depths of culture as a dynamic that destabilizes cultural schemata. Note that from his perspective, religion remains locative, at least phenomenologically. That is, we desire order and place, we act so as to assure it, even though, unbeknownst to us, deeper religious forces undermine the work we do to secure our place in the cosmos.

Taylor does argue that such processes are under way, whether we recognize it or not, but he also points to the possibility of a self-conscious religious, a/theological comprehension of complexity and emergence. We should then read his distinction between religiosity and religion like this: the former would be the refusal to acknowledge destabilization and emergence as “religious” and the latter would be that set of symbols, myths, and rituals by which human beings try to relate human life to the process of *emergence*, that is, of stabilization *and* destabilization. Religion, from this perspective, can acknowledge the play of *différance*. Taylor’s theory, in short, leaves room for the possibility (though not the necessity or inevitability) of a religious or theological conception of the divine that disrupts every identity from within and displaces us even as we take our places, a conception of the absolute in which any particular articulation of religious figure or religious place points beyond itself to a constitutive excess of nonsense over sense.¹⁵

¹⁴ For another version of this form of religious stabilization, see Bruce Lincoln’s discussion of “religions of rebellion” (1985).

¹⁵ I owe this way of thinking about it to Hent de Vries (2008: 15, 57, 64–67).

Taylor finds this possibility at the end of his genealogy of western theology, philosophy, and theory, in which he finds early, ambivalent acknowledgments of differential play that are followed, especially starting with Hegel, by a more affirmative recognition that this play is "divine." A crucial point in this history comes with the nominalist philosophy initiated by Ockham, which privileges God's will, or "deed," over God's reason, or "Word" and thus offers glimpses of the divine play of difference. Privileging God's will means that "there can be no certainty about the continuation or stability of the cosmic order ... God can always undo what he has done, and thus, there can be no final certainty or security in the world" (57). Ockham shied away from the most radical implications of this idea, but his nominalism did recognize a fundamental destabilizing force that is divine, not simply something the divine Word combats. This nominalism finds ambivalent expression in Calvin and Luther and then is made explicit, in different ways, in the post-Reformation and post-Christian thought of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. For Taylor, Hegel is the key figure here, for his is the first conceptually sophisticated, self-conscious articulation of the idea of reality as a process of creative emergence. Poststructuralists, however, have tended to read Hegel as the totalizing thinker *par excellence*, viewing his concept of "Absolute Knowledge" as serving the same kind of function Smith ascribes to the theologian's "Beginning" (though in Hegel's case the Archimedian point is an "End," where map and territory finally converge). Taylor reads this concept differently, as a claim of "absolute difference," a "nonoppositional difference that is the condition of the possibility of all differences and every identity" (306). Absolute knowledge, then, grasps the differential openness of structure, and of reality itself, and so makes it possible to move beyond the purely critical impulses of poststructuralism by imagining nontotalizing structures as relational webs and affirming the constitutive relationality or constitutive differentiability of all things. "Absolute knowledge," writes Taylor, "involves the apprehension of the complex process in which determinate forms of knowledge and specific institutions emerge and pass away through their ongoing interrelations. In this process, the only thing that is not relative is, paradoxically, the relativity of specific figures of the world and determinate shapes of consciousness" (166). Religiously and theologically, we have no place to stand except in the midst of this creative/destructive flux.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Complexity theory, Hegel, *différance*: more than Smith or Gill, then, Taylor shows us religion at play and offers theoretical resources for imagining religion beyond the locative paradigm. Further, to the extent that we would agree that Hegel (and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) are examples of “religion,” he offers evidence of a differential conception of the divine. But the examples he offers are clearly limited to a particular religious trajectory: a reading of western religious thought that essentially affirms Hegel’s vision of Protestantism as the “consummate religion.” Thus, to think that he offers us an adequate theory of religion would be to make the mistake so many contemporary theorists have identified: to lean too heavily on Christian and especially Protestant—even post-Protestant—models of religion in order to construct a general theory of religion. At most, like Smith in *Map is Not Territory*, Taylor provides examples of religion that should lead us to consider alternative religious mapping strategies; like Smith in *To Take Place*, Taylor is working “toward” a theory of religion.

What kind of path to theory does *After God* urge us to follow? In showing us religion at play, Taylor undermines the distinctions both Gill and Smith make between religion and the study of religion. Taylor’s playful theologian, or a/theologian, looks more like Smith’s pilgrim than Smith’s theologian. And as Taylor’s argument unfolds in *After God*, particularly in the final chapters, we find the lines between “theoretical” and “theological” thinking increasingly put into play. This, for Taylor, happens of necessity, for he takes his historical account of western philosophy and theology to demonstrate that modern and post-modern philosophical and theoretical movements, such as the critical philosophy of Kant, the anthropological structuralism of Levi-Strauss, and the poststructuralisms of Derrida and others are inextricably linked to theologies of the Word or Deed. He thus concludes that “theory is implicitly theological or a/theological, and theology and a/theology are inescapably theoretical” (298) and that this is particularly evident in theoretical contests of the second half of the twentieth century between foundationalism and nonfoundationalism. When he criticizes poststructuralism for its inability to conceptualize the move from criticism to construction, he is indicting genealogists and historicists for failing to acknowledge the metaphysical, theological, and/or normative grounds of their work. An adequate theory of religion, he argues, must acknowledge that “description and prescription ... are joined in nonlinear feedback loops that render thinking and acting codependent ... what is

implies what ought to be, and on the other hand, the realization of what ought to be transforms what is" (355).

One can, of course, bracket metaphysical, theological, or normative issues as one pursues studies of particular religious phenomena. But to do so when one *theorizes* religion inevitably begs questions about representation, subjectivity, history, politics, meaning and normativity. We see this in "Map," I think, when Smith takes the normative position that to be human is to possess historical consciousness and critical rationality. This is one way scholars of religion take a stand. We see a different, albeit closely related way of taking a stand in Gill's "Play" when he claims that religion negates "play structurality" while the study of religion "seriously tak[es] a stance while acknowledging its absurdity" (306). The appeals to play and incongruity in the work of Smith and Gill often serve to obscure this point and, more generally, the complicated relationship between religion and the study of religion. Taylor helps us see that religion, at times, *can* "deal with Chaos" and even that there is something "theological" in taking a stand in the midst of "absurdity." At the very least, it seems to me, acknowledging absurdity means that we must refuse to anchor our own sense of identity as scholars by theorizing religion as inevitably locative.¹⁶ We should, instead, consider how further exploration of the various ways in which religion deals with chaos might offer genealogists, historicists, and other scholars not only new appreciation for the complexity of religion but also new ways to think about how to play in the midst of this chaos—if not how to take a stand, at least how to move forward in our work.

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¹⁶ I follow Robert Orsi here, who claims that as scholars we must allow our conceptions of ourselves to be "vulnerable to the radically destabilizing possibilities of a genuine encounter with an unfamiliar way of life" (2005: 198).

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