

Conversations with Sam.
Sam Gill's *The Proper Study of Religion:*
Building on Jonathan Z. Smith (2020)

*With Jeffrey S. Lidke, Sam Gill, Jeanette Reedy Solano,
John C. Thibdeau, Mary Dunn, Seth Schermerhorn,
and Hugh B. Urban*

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Introduction: tracking the stories of a dancing trickster

It gives me profound joy to see the coming into print of this set of essays celebrating the extraordinary career of professor emeritus, scholar extraordinaire, the dancing trickster with an unforgettable smile, my beloved mentor, Sam Gill. Over the course of his career, Gill's extraordinarily wide-ranging

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interests have included: Native American religions; Australian history and Aboriginal religions; religion theory; dance theory; travel to and study of dancing in Ghana, Mali, Java, Bali, Thailand, Nepal, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica; religion and technology; the quintessential importance of dancing to religion and being human; futurist studies; and the biological and philosophy study of human movement. Essential to Gill's academic creativity and insight, he founded a world dance studio, where he taught and choreographed dancing and sponsored visas for more than two dozen artists from many countries, especially Africa and Latin America. Through it all, Gill has never stopped dancing, smiling, or inspiring his many students to think in novel, creative ways about the ludic nature of the human animal and our curious ability to study and reflect on ourselves.

In the essays that follow, leading scholars across diverse fields reflect on the methodological and theoretical significance of Gill's scholarship, with particular attention to his award-winning book, *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith*. In *The Proper Study of Religion*, Gill charts an innovative course of development for the academic study of religion by engaging the legacy of Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017), perhaps the field's most influential scholar in the last several decades. Smith was Gill's mentor for 50 years. Their careers coincided with the explosive expansion of the study of religion in secular universities in the United States, beginning in the mid-1960s. Building on Smith's foundational legacy through creative encounters, in *The Proper Study of Religion*, Gill explores an extensive range of engaging topics, including: comparison as essential to academic technique and to human knowledge itself; the important role of experience, richly understood, for both academic studies of religion and for religions as lived; play, philosophically understood, as a core dynamic of Smith's entire program; the sometimes confounding relationship of academic document-based studies with the sensory-rich real world of religions; and self-moving as providing a biological and philosophical foundation on which to develop a proper academic study of religion with expansive potential. *The Proper Study of Religion* is at once Gill's tribute to the remarkable and challenging work of his extraordinary mentor, while also offering critical assessments and innovative ideas in the effort to advance the field of religious studies and inspire his own students and colleagues.

Each of the scholars in this volume engage an aspect of Gill's work as a lens through which to critically examine the current state of the study of religion, and they offer detailed and practical principles and examples with the potential to guide the field into the future. Further, the volume includes Sam's own essay, as well as his insightful responses to the authors' essays.

Who better than Sam Gill to help us take up the challenge of developing an effective hermeneutics of the moving body? In his opening essay, 'Dancing lessons: a biological & philosophical account of human distinctiveness as relevant to the proper study of religion,' Gill reflects not just on the insights in *The Proper Study of Religion*, but also on a host of other contemporary works he has published since 2018. These works highlight the extraordinary range of his interests, which include, but are not limited to, technology, photography, film, art, biology, and philosophy. Gill is a 21st-century Renaissance man. His interest is not simply 'religion,' but rather what it means to be human, in all our lived complexity and beauty. Toward this end, he reflects brilliantly in the close of his essay on the 'dancing lessons' he has learned over the last 35 years in his own effort to understand himself and humanity through the moving body. In this regard, he exhibits his unparalleled ability to articulate a philosophy of the moving body grounded in the writings of both philosophers (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Pierce, Maine de Biran) and scientists (Sir Charles Sherrington, Nikolai Bernstein). His 'ending dip' is ten lessons learned from the extraordinary and still moving dance of his career. His tenth point concludes and distills the essence of his first nine points: 'It is moving itself that is the generative source of coherence and valuation and vitality and sense-making and creativity.'

In the second essay in our volume, 'A Renaissance scholar with a physicist's heart,' Jeannette Solano (Professor of Comparative Religion, California State University, Fullerton) addresses three themes inspired by Gill's work: (1) the state of the field; (2) the limits of body-based epistemology; and (3) the potential for religion and film studies as a 'creative path forward.' Echoing Gill, Solano reflects that the 'great experiment' of teaching religious studies in secular institutions is in 'a time of reckoning,' as a result, at least in part, of a movement away from the generic and toward a level of hyper-specialization that makes comparison all but impossible. Solano then moves on to critique Gill's body-based epistemology, observing that 'while we *are* our bodies ... we are [also] *more than* our bodies.' While Gill emphasizes the 'moving body' as the knowing agent in his work, Solano here argues that our consciousness and capacity to think are related to, but not necessarily dependent on, our moving bodies. Further, she asks about the role our senses play in the epistemological process. Finally, she turns to her own field, religion and film studies, in pursuit of a 'creative path forward.' Specifically, she suggests that perhaps the academic study of religion could sail through its current perilous waters by changing or at least expanding the artifacts it produces. As opposed to just the printed word, the field, she argues, the academy should put greater value on creative work

as legitimately 'scholarly.' In this regard, she sees particular promise for the potential of film as a medium to carry the insights of religious studies scholars into the foreseeable future.

In his essay, 'From the proper to the sound study of religion: resonating with Sam Gill and J. Z. Smith,' John Thibdeau (Visiting Assistant Professor, University of Rochester, New York) begins by reflecting on Gill's understanding of the way that both religion and the study of religion give rise to creative thought grounded in the 'impossible copresence' and 'necessary double face' of the *is* and the *is not*. Referring to this creative process as a 'playful structurality,' Thibdeau explores five areas in the study of religion impacted by Gill's work: the naturalness of comparison; ambiguity and the everyday; material religion and the body; duality and the non-linear; and methods. In each of these areas, Thibdeau draws from Gill's work to affirm Gill's own conclusion that indeed the ends of the study of religion and the ends of religions themselves 'are not entirely or necessarily different' (Gill 2020:162). Indeed, he playfully suggests, the 'proper academic study of religion is indeed the religious study of religion, so long as we think religion through the living, moving, and feeling being that is, as Sam might call it, the dancing animal.'

In her essay, 'The origin myth of religious studies,' Mary Dunn (Associate Professor of Method and Theory in Religious Studies at Saint Louis University) identifies the 1963 Supreme Court ruling in *Abington v. Schempp* as the origin point of religious studies. Specifically, in the ruling of Justice Brennan she highlights the critical distinction identified between 'the teaching *about* religion' and 'the teaching *of* religion.' This is a difference, she notes, between the confessional and the historical, the emic and the etic approaches to religion. Rightly, she praises Gill for pointing out that in reality the teaching *about* religion and the teaching *of* religion – religious practice and religious studies, the religious subject and the religion scholar – are in reality not so different after all. For Gill, religion has a 'necessary double face' grounded in an 'aesthetics of the impossible,' which is the juxtaposing of things that initially do not seem to belong together, like the 'divine' and the 'human,' 'virginity' and 'birth,' etc. Similarly, Dunn observes, Gill's great insight (taking the lead of Smith) is that the study of religion is itself double-faced. The scholar's own study of religion is itself a creative process that mirrors the creativity inherent in religion itself. Dunn concludes her essay by noting that the juxtaposition of the one (the teaching *about* religion) and the other (the teaching *of* religion) demands the relentless self-reflection of the scholar of religion, demanding that we ask hard questions about 'objectivity and neutrality, about empiricism, description,

normativity, and transcendence, that urges us toward ever more finely honed analytical tools and ever more precisely articulated scholarly ends.'

Seth Schermerhorn (Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Hamilton College), like Gill, is a non-indigenous scholar whose research has included the study of indigenous traditions. In 'Sam Gill and me: moving toward a proper study of religion,' Schermerhorn reflects on his efforts to accept Gill's challenge to approach the study of religion through a body-based epistemology. Praising Gill for helping religion scholars 'see farther,' Schermerhorn observes the challenges and controversial nature of such an approach. If we shift from a word-centered approach to a body-centered approach to the study of religion, what precisely are our methods for conducting such an approach and conveying its conclusions to other scholars and our students? This question is at the heart of Schermerhorn's reflections. In conclusion, he laments with Gill that a bias against 'dancing' has dominated the field of religious studies, which is in need of not only a more developed study of ritual, but also an equivalent to dance anthropology that takes seriously the moving body as the means for not only expressing but also understanding what it means to be religious.

In our closing essay, 'A contested study of religion: reflections on Sam Gill's *The Proper Study of Religion*,' Hugh Urban (Distinguished Professor of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University) raises questions about two aspects of Gill's work. First, he addresses the theme of the playful, creative dimension of religion in Gill's work. Urban finds such an approach at once productive and problematic. On the one hand, the theme of play (which includes creativity, metaphor, and imagination) highlights that religion is not, as Urban puts it, 'some sort of *a priori* entity that exists independently out there in the world but is instead largely a second order generalization and imaginative construction, one in which scholars have a large part to play.' However, Urban sees two limitations to such an approach. First, Urban objects to the idea that religion is *solely* the creation of scholars' study. Citing a range of historical examples, Urban points out that while scholars do play a significant role in the formation of religion, so do a host of other historical actors, ranging from religious practitioners to journalists, lawyers, courts, and various government agencies. Second, Urban takes issue with Gill's description of the study of religion as a form of 'play.' While not rejecting the category of play as an aspect of the study of religion, Urban argues for the value of categories like *violence* and *conflict* as offering fruitful inroads to the study of religion.

My own work, which is focused on the Śākta Tantric traditions of the Himalaya, bears the stamp of Gill's creative, interdisciplinary, body-based hermeneutics (Lidke 2017). I studied with Gill from 1986 to 1990 as a

major of religious studies in the BA program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. During that time, I took from Gill every course he offered. The memories from his classes are indelible. Gill had a remarkable presence in the classroom. Looking back now, it was as if for him teaching was a dance, a play, a moment of creative interpretive theater. He taught me to love the art of hermeneutics. He showed me that tracking the stories of one's scholarly sources and interests could at once be a livelihood and a way of life. From Gill, I learned that the teaching of religion could integrate the best methods of the sciences and the humanities. In the now 32 years that have passed since I last took a class with Gill, I continue to be amazed at his seemingly endless scholarly production,¹ his exceptionally expansive curiosity, and his passion for the dance of life, in all its many forms.

The fine essays in this collection are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg with regard to the potential for developing Gill's ideas and applying them to the study of religion. Having stood on the shoulders of his own mentor, Gill now invites us not to stand on his, but to dance with him, and in so doing to think and express ourselves in unbounded creative ways that will enable us to not only better understand religion, but to be ourselves more fully and truly human. It may be that we can never 'solve' the *aporias* of life, but perhaps we can embody them by allowing ourselves to dance, in all senses of the word.

Jeffrey S. Lidke
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Note

- 1 As a case in point, as I complete the drafting of this introduction, Sam informs me that he has recently published yet another book to add to my 'Gill library.' This time, it is a two-volume, 700-page work titled *Reality Under Siege: Explorations of the Creative Role of Difference* (2024).

References

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