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Roundtable

The origin myth of religious studies

Mary Dunn

Once upon a time, long, long ago (actually, it was June of 1963), the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Abington v. Schempp*. The case involved a Pennsylvania state law mandating that a portion of the Bible should be read aloud in public schools at the start of each day. In an 8–1 decision, the Supreme Court held that the Pennsylvania law violated the first amendment, prohibiting the government from making any law 'respecting the establishment of religion.' The establishment clause, opined Justice Clark, writing for the majority, obliges the government to 'maintain strict neutrality, neither aiding nor opposing religion,' a neutrality that was belied by the facts of this case. It might well be said, Justice Clark continued, 'that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities.' The decision in this case, Justice Clark concluded, does not prohibit 'such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education.' Justice Brennan concurred. There is a difference, he wrote, between 'the teaching *about* religion' and 'the teaching *of* religion' (*Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963)).

And this is how the discipline of religious studies was born.

The origin myth of religious studies is rooted in the distinction *Abington v. Schempp* drew between the teaching of religion and the teaching about religion. The difference is, as Gill explains it, between 'teaching religion for religious purposes and teaching about religion in a secular environment' (Gill 2020:10). The difference is between the study of religion from the inside and the study of religion from the outside, between the theological and the humanistic, the confessional and the historical, the emic and the etic.

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Gill's *Proper Study of Religion* is at once a retrospective assessment of the field of religious studies as it has taken shape since *Abington*, and at the same time a prospective proposal for where the field should go from here. It is a triumph of a book – warm, humane, intelligent – a sustained meditation on the influence of Jonathan Z. Smith and his enduring impact on the theory and method of the study of religion and religions. Juxtaposed against the court's decision in *Abington v. Schempp*, it is also a book that gives rise to thought, to reflection, to the oscillatory comparison between the myth of religious studies and the reality, between the map of the discipline articulated by the court and the territory of its actual practice.

The origin myth of religious studies is a form 'demanding juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought' (Gill 2020:90). Moving back and forth between the map of the discipline drawn by the court and the study of religion as Gill describes it, I am struck by what I can only describe as incongruity or incoherence – that is, the non-fit between the two. The origin myth of religious studies is one that distinguishes cleanly, clearly, and in no uncertain terms between the teaching *about* religion and the teaching *of* religion. But where does the teaching *about* religion end and where does the teaching *of* religion begin? It is one of the signal achievements of Gill's *Proper Study of Religion* to persistently press the point that perhaps these two – the teaching *about* religion and the teaching *of* religion, religious practice and religious studies, the religious subject and the religion scholar – are not so different after all.

Religion, for Gill, following Smith, 'is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's "situation" so as to have space in which to meaningfully dwell' (Gill 2020:79, citing Smith 1993:290–1). A distinctly human enterprise, religion is creative, imaginative, inventive, trading in what Gill (again, following Smith) calls the 'necessary double-face,' the play of one and two, the unresolved co-presence of things that do not go together. 'I've come to think that a distinctive forte of religion,' Gill writes, 'is its endless creative capacity to trade in double-faces; I call it an aesthetic of impossibles. Virgin births. Blue gods. Death that is eternal life,' the fully divine, fully human Christ embraced by Christians who knew 'full well that gods and humans are mutually exclusive categories,' the bread that is body, the wine that is blood, the tomb that is womb, the maps (the myths and the rituals) that do not actually fit the territory of lived experience (Gill 2020:66, 210–11). As a condition of the necessary double-face, the facts of unresolved co-presence, the aesthetics of the impossible, religious people move back and forth between one term and the other, riding the energetic waves created by the juxtaposition of two things that do not go together. The dynamic at

work here, Gill suggests, building on Smith, is that of play – or the riddle, the jest, the joke.

It is precisely this dynamic that characterizes the study of religion too. No less than religious people, scholars of religion play too. We, too, have our rituals; we, too, have our myths; we, too, generate maps of 'the worlds of other men' that do not fit with the actual territories. We, too, oscillate between two logical frames – our theories and the data – in a relentless dance of projection and accommodation, as we strive (impossibly!) to close the gap between them. And although we like to pretend that we don't, we, too, do this in order to make room within which to 'meaningfully dwell,' for as Smith so keenly noted, when we study religion we are always ineluctably studying ourselves, always refiguring, always revisioning, always tailoring the data to respond to *our* problems, *our* questions, *our* personal and subjective interests (Gill 2020:79, citing Smith 1993:290–1).

'It was a persistent insight of Smith,' Gill writes, 'to recognize this commonality between religion and religions, between the academic study of religion(s) and their actual practice. The rarely considered implication is the possibility that the ends of each … are not entirely or necessarily different' (Gill 2020:229). Have you heard the one about the Bible in the public schools? So, two guys walk into a courtroom … and guess what?! The joke's on us! It turns out there's no difference between the teaching *about* religion and the teaching *of* religion, after all! Both engage in the business of 'making the world meaningful'; both play between the 'mutually exclusive' and the 'logically incompatible'; both thrive 'on the insights offered by such a double or multiple perspective' (Gill 2020:174). The structural parallels between religious practice and religious studies belie any hard and fast difference between the labor of the religious subject and the work of the religion scholar, such that the distinction between the teaching *about* religion and the teaching *of* religion – the distinction that justified the birth of the discipline and its permissible inclusion in the secular academy – disappears.

But, of course, it doesn't. Not really. The joke here, like all jokes, operates according to the logic of the necessary double-face – that 'impossible copresence of sameness (even identity) and difference' (Gill 2020:70). The teaching *about* religion is like the teaching *of* religion. The teaching about religion is clearly *not* like the teaching of religion. It is the friction between the two – the myth and the facts, the map and the territory – that gives rise to thought, that invites us to move 'back and forth between them, examining, and delighting in how they fit, or fail to fit, together' (Gill 2020:90). It is the juxtaposition of the one (the teaching *about* religion) and the other (the teaching *of* religion) that demands our relentless self-reflection, that

insists we ask hard questions as scholars of religion 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.

Have you heard the one about the Bible in the public schools? Now, that's *funny*.

Response from Sam Gill: Mary Dunn

To use the framework of *Abington v. Schempp* is appropriate, and to refer to it as 'myth' in all its creative ambiguity is delightful and useful.

I sense that your churning around the issue of the relationship between religion studies (proper/secular) and religious studies (religious) and theology is at the heart of your own work. I think of your article 'Playing with religion' (2021), as well as your book *Where Paralytics Walk and the Blind See* (2022), in which you struggle with the religious and secular studies of religion. This is *the issue* of the modern study of religion. I much appreciate your framing of the discussion of religious and secular studies of religion in terms of play and joke (honoring Smith), and my discussion under the awkward term 'aesthetic of impossibles.' You do this as well in your publications. My sense is that this is but the beginning. What I find important about the aesthetic of impossibles is that it is the source of enormous power. It is precisely the ability to consider two things as the same, even equal, when we know all along that they are not the same at all – an ability I pose as distinctively human – that is the bootstrap to awareness, the acquisition of knowledge, the capability to perceive with awareness and self-reflectiveness. It underlies metaphor, language, ritual, symbol, art, etc. So to say that the practice of religions (the actual historical, cultural behaviors) and the practice of religion studies are the same, but also not the same, should be the beginning of ever-unfolding contemplation and reflection.

You align with Smith's understanding of religion keying on the notion of 'meaningful.' While I consider some usefulness of 'meaningful' (including the openness of the 'full' part), I am increasingly interested in the coherence–incoherence continuum, because it requires ongoingness, moving, dynamics, rather than meaning, which I think encourages a halt and a falseness of conclusion and objectification.

I must add that I am deeply grateful for your comments on the style of *The Proper Study of Religion*. As I have, shall I say, 'matured' through the decades, I find myself deeply interested in the elements of style. I would hope, following, if also skewing a bit, to confirm McLuhan, that 'the style is the message.'

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