

From the proper to the sound study of religion: resonating with Sam Gill and J. Z. Smith

John C. Thibdeau

Through a retrospective yet forward-looking engagement with J. Z. Smith, Sam Gill considers possibilities for what he calls the proper study of religion. While differentiating between religion and religions, he recognizes that both share in a common feature of humanity that gives rise to thought and creativity – a structurality characterized by an ‘impossible copresence’ and an ‘aesthetic of impossibles’ – of *is* and *is not*. In these brief comments, I will try to amplify some of the resonances of this oscillating and playful structurality with a few key areas in the study of religion, namely, the naturalness of comparison, everyday religion, and the body.¹

For Smith, as for Sam, comparison is an essential technique of the proper academic study of religion that displays this underlying structurality. As Sam writes,

Comparison has the necessary double-face of being powered by the distinctly human capacity to say that one thing is another, yet what is important is that the one thing isn't like the other and we know it all along. Such a structurality – one of play and joke and riddle – applies remarkably not only to comparison but, writ large, to religion as we make the effort to distinguish it and religions as we endeavor to observe and be abducted by them. (Gill 2020:56)

One aspect of this double-face is that comparison is both natural and not natural. On the one hand, ‘there's no natural comparison,’ meaning that in the context of religions the objects of comparison are not given. The result is that religion is a category of the scholar created in and through the act of comparison, through the encounter with modes of similarity and difference in the world. Yet, on the other hand, as a technique and style of thought and human perception, comparison is also thoroughly natural.

Affiliation

John Thibdeau: Independent scholar, USA.

email: thibdeauj@gmail.com

Sam writes, ‘The technique of comparison is of the nature of human intelligence [although] the specifics of any comparison are the construct of the comparer and not given by nature’ (Gill 2020:39). As such, comparison is natural and at the same time it is not natural.

I’d like to develop this approach to comparison a bit further through an analogy with the phenomenon of beat perception. While we often speak about the beat in music, as if it were a part of the music itself, beat is actually constructed by the listener in the act of listening itself; it exists not in the music nor in the head, but in the encounter. Take, for example, the common tuning practice, in which the perception of beats is used to determine whether two (or more) instruments are in tune. When two notes are played and they are slightly out of tune, the patterns of interaction produce a ‘beating’ sound that can be attenuated gradually until the two are in tune. Furthermore, ample research has illustrated that while beat is related to pattern recognition in cognition, it more fundamentally recruits various motor systems and operates as a mechanism for synchronizing and timing movement. In other words, beat is a cue to move. Beats are not simply things out there in the world; nor is the perception of beats a passive reception of sense data. The beat is a felt cue to move that arises out of an encounter. Just as beat is an emergent phenomenon of a natural comparison that generates movement, so, too, does religion emerge from the comparative enterprise that generates thought.²

I touch on this analogy for two reasons. First, I think it illustrates an important feature of the creative element of the comparative enterprise; that is, how a phenomenon such as beat (or religion) comes into existence through the perception of the listener (comparer/observer). Second, for those of us studying religions in the contemporary world, the clear boundaries that would allow us to put things side by side or juxtapose religions are difficult to render; there is mutual influence, interference, and feedback across ideas and practices. Such an approach may provide an array of alternative corporeal and sensory concepts that can potentially capture the diverse modes of encounter between traditions as it occurs for the scholar – concepts like interference, resonance, consonance, dissonance, synchronization, entrainment, echoes – that may form a set of concepts which reflect the moving-feeling quality of comparison itself. Such a study then may also shift attention away from comparison of isolated and reified traditions, reshaping ideas about religion akin to what you see with beat; religion is a beat (a cue to move) that is produced in and through the encounter of the individual human with multiple sounds (religions). What might a ‘sound’ study of religion (as opposed to the proper study of religion) look like, playing of course on the dual sense of sound as reliable and aural?

A second critical issue is that related to the ongoing debate of everyday religion – often glossed with a variety of terms such as lived religion, popular religion, folk religion, and a host of other iterations. Sam cites on several occasions Smith’s tendency to bring out the everydayness of religions with lines such as, ‘Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one’s “situation” so as to have “space” in which to meaningfully dwell ...’ and ‘human life – or perhaps more pointedly, humane life – is not a series of burning bushes’ (Gill 2020:99). In short, religions are not the worldview, nor are they the lived experience in itself; they are the practices and means for bringing the necessary incongruity of the map and territory to bear on the realities of daily life. The pragmatics of religions as performed in daily life is a key feature of current attempts to develop an idea of everyday religion in which religious life is inseparable from the complexities, ambiguities, and experiences of ordinary life. Both approaches emphasize the primordality of the everyday and the body. As Sam writes, ‘A proper academic study of religion must have a bodied, even biological, basis for comprehending such notions as conceptions, transcendence, and the accompanying human concepts such as spirit, essence, numinous, and theos. The corporeality of concepts as well as the experience of the incorporeal aspects of moving corporeality offer these bases’ (Gill 2020:147).

Experience therefore becomes a key component of Sam’s proper study of religion. However, rather than focusing on the phenomenological and empiricist approaches to experience, Sam shifts attention to the adjectival form of experience, that is, as the cumulative weight and effect of practice and repetition. Such an approach to the body and experience is crucial for an approach to everyday religion, as religion becomes a means for cultivating and exercising a range of skills that allow individuals to navigate the nuances of ordinary life. Moreover, these skills, gestural routines, and perceptual habits shape the content and form of their respective worldviews – from the basic corporeal concepts like in and out as the basis for identities of us and them, to more subtle connotations of light and heavy movement styles with moral propriety, cool and hot with emotional temperament, sharp and dull with personality traits. For Sam, it is from the elemental experiences of the body moving that we get the notions of transcendence and the spirit, namely, the disembodied. He writes, ‘The human imagination of the spiritual and the mystical are possible only as constructs grounded in the most quotidian experiences of perception and self-movement, as an imaginative species of the common genus of transcendence’ (Gill 2020:147). These bodied and aesthetic ‘concepts’ not only shape the frameworks for worldviews, making possible their articulation in sensible

forms, but insofar as they are bodied they are also subject to change because they require performative iterations. As bodied, religions are always open to change, because it is through our bodies that we make (and unmake) and are made (and unmade); the structurality of our bodies is the very structurality of religions, which is the very structurality of the study of religion, which is the structurality of thought itself. But as Sam always said, gesture (and the body) is but a starting point, a clue, a lens, or a spark that gives rise to further reflection and investigation, not an end in itself.

Response from Sam Gill: John Thibdeau

John, your presentation is loaded with insights I would love to fully address. Your discussion of the pervasiveness of religion in life is so important in reprioritizing the attention of religion scholarship. A significant revolution would occur in religion studies should religion scholars follow Smith's preference for understanding religion as not set apart, as indeed, everyday. Your comments on materiality and body reflect a similar significant shift. Religion is always already body. Body in religion studies is not a niche study or 'and also' or vehicle to mind/thought. Your comments on 'duality and nonlinearity' open wide swaths on which to build a more interesting study of religion. I have been fascinated by both metastability and nonlinearity – discussed in both biology and philosophy – as being of fundamental importance to the power and creativity of not only religion, but what is distinctively human. As an ethnographer, your comments on transduction and the efforts to take seriously my struggling efforts to demonstrate the vast difference between movement (to change place) and moving (the ongoingness that is never in any place) deserve a whole sprawling discussion that I believe would produce rich results.

Your concluding comment that religions and the studies of religion may not be entirely different is also made by Mary Dunn. Again, this is an area deserving extensive consideration. I think it is an example of what I consider an aesthetic of impossibles. Of course, they are different – the whole point of trying to articulate a 'proper' study of religion and to avoid the academic theology that greatly shaped the early phase of the modern expansion of religion studies in secular universities. Yet they are the same as well. As I would put it, the lives and behaviors of scholars and intellectuals, religious and secular, are, like their subjects, comprised of identity-creating postures, gestures, practices, and skills gained through years of repetition.

I am fascinated by your imagining a study of religion foregrounding sound, illustrated in your delightful account of 'beat recognition.' So much should be made of this.

The last essay of my book *On Moving* (2022), titled ‘Paean to being human,’ foregrounds sound and listening to praise as what distinguishes us as human beings, considering the biological and cosmic based theories of harmony from Pythagoras to Kepler. I have also been inspired by Michel Serres, who wrote:

Sustained, this unheard of song rises from the body, in the grip of rhythmic movement – heart, breath and regularity – and seems to emerge from the receptors of the muscles and joints, in sum, from the sense of the gestures and movement, invading the body first, then the environment, with a harmony. ... I hear the divine invading the Universe. (Serres 2011:5)

And by Jean-Luc Nancy, who wrote:

Whereas visible or tactile presence occurs in a motionless ‘at the same time,’ sonorous presence is an essentially mobile ‘at the same time,’ vibrating from the come-and-go between the source and the ear, through open space, the presence of presence rather than pure presence. One might say there is a *simultaneity* of the visible and a *contemporaneity* of the audible. (Nancy 2007:16)

I especially appreciate the character of your remarks as being consistent with the ‘building on’ notion I tried to express in the subtitle of *The Proper Study of Religion*.

Notes

- 1 In the longer version of this article, I touch on a few additional topics, some of which are treated in Sam Gill’s response to this paper. One of these deals with the question of duality and nonlinearity as it pertains to a dualistic structurality. I ask how comparison operates when it is not a juxtaposition of the two, but possibly a superimposition of the three or more. The second relates to methodology in the study of religion, with a focus on the idea of ethnography as transduction, that is, a transformation of one kind of reality into another.
- 2 For studies on beat perception and its relation to movement and the motor system, see Todd and Lee (2015), Olshanksy and co-workers (2015), Konoike and associates (2012), Grahn (2012), and Grahn and Brett (2007).

References

- Gill, S. (2020) *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197527221.001.0001>
- Gill, S. (2022) *On Moving: A Biological & Philosophical Account of Human Distinctiveness*. ‘Aesthetic of Impossibles’ ArtBook Series, vol. 2. Boulder: self-published.
- Grahn, J. A. (2012) Neural mechanisms of rhythm perception: present findings and future directions. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4(4): 585–606. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-8765.2012.01213.x>

- Grahn, J. A., and Brett, M. (2007) Rhythm and beat perception in motor areas of the brain. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 19(5): 893–906. <https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2007.19.5.893>
- Konoike, N., Kotozaki, Y., Miyachi, S., Miyauchi, C. M., Yomogida, Y., Akimoto, Y., Kuraoka, K., Sugiura, M., Kawashima, R., and Nakamura K. (2012) Rhythm information represented in the fronto-parieto-cerebellar motor system. *Neuroimage* 63: 328–38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2012.07.002>
- Nancy, J.-L. (2007) *Listening* (trans. C. Mandell). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Olshanksy M. P., Bar, R. J., Fogarty, M., and DeSouza, J. F. X. (2015) Supplementary motor area and primary auditory cortex activation in an expert break-dancer during kinesthetic imagery of dance music. *Neurocase* 21(5): 607–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13554794.2014.960428>
- Serres, M. (2011) *Variations on the Body* (trans. R. Burks). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Todd, N. P. M., and Lee, C. S. (2015) The sensory-motor theory of rhythm and beat induction 20 years on: a new synthesis and future perspectives. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 26(9): 444–54. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2015.00444>