

A contested study of religion: reflections on Sam Gill's *The Proper Study of Religion*

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I am flattered to be asked to contribute something to the discussion of Sam Gill's important book on the work and legacy of Jonathan Z. Smith. Like most of us working in the academic study of religion today, I have been deeply influenced by Smith's wide-ranging body of research, and I have also found Gill to be a provocative and inspiring theorist in his own right. Gill and I first met over 20 years ago at the University of Chicago at Boulder when I was a young graduate student and job candidate. We then had a spirited and (I think ...) friendly exchange back in 2001, when I wrote an article that dealt in part with one of the chapters that has been republished in *The Proper Study of Religion* (Gill 1998, 2002, 2020:77–108; Urban 2001). My own thinking about religion over the past two decades has been shaped in many ways by both Smith's and Gill's work, so I am happy to share some of my reflections on the book, for what they are worth.

There are many intriguing, noteworthy, and important parts of Gill's book that stand out for me. These include: his keen insights into the role of comparison in the study of religion; his discussion of the role of experience, embodiment, and movement in both the practice and the study of religion; and his analysis of the ways in which comparison works like a kind of metaphor, joke, riddle, and play (Gill 2020:65–76, 95–108). In my own work, for example, I am especially interested in this aspect of comparison as 'metaphor,' and I have borrowed heavily from both Smith and Gill on this point.

However, for the sake of brevity in this short article, I will hone in on just one or two key points that I think are at once extremely *useful*, but also in some ways a bit problematic, or at least undeveloped. If my comments seem critical, this is not because I am mounting any serious attack on Gill's book, but rather because I think this is in keeping with the spirit of his

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own dynamic engagement with the critical study of religion. In his second chapter, 'No place to stand,' Gill quotes one of the most famous passages in Smith's work, which comes from the preface to his classic work, *Imagining Religion*: 'Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy' (1988:xi). Gill then uses this as a springboard to talk about the playful or 'ludic' way in which Smith approaches the imagining of religion, particularly through acts of comparative juxtaposition and reframing. As Gill puts it,

Smith's approach to religion can be considered *sub specie ludi*. Play is an important element running through Jonathan Smith's study of religion, key both to appreciating and critically evaluating his work ... Religion, as Smith understands it, is a mode of human creativity. (Gill 2020:79)

I find this insight into the role of scholarly imagination and play at once extremely productive and in some ways problematic. On the one hand, it does highlight the important point that the category of religion is not 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. Gill also highlights the role of metaphor, play, and creativity in the construction of the category of religion, which occurs precisely through imaginative acts of comparison that might span widely across historical periods and diverse cultural contexts (Gill 2020:72–6; see Smith 1990:52).

On the other hand, however, I do think there are at least two problems or limitations in this way of describing the academic study of religion. First, I think Smith's statement that 'Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study' is overly simplistic and ultimately inaccurate. In my own work on new religious movements such as the Church of Scientology, for example, I have found that 'religion' is by no means *solely* the creation of scholars working in the academy; rather, it is really a far more complex historical construction that involves *many, many* different actors, including not only scholars but *also*: religious practitioners, journalists, lawyers, courts, and various government agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, among others (Urban 2013:4, 155–77, 210). I think we could say the same in the case of other controversial religious groups that have struggled for religious recognition and religious freedoms, such as the Native American Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and numerous others (see Maroukis 2010; Shipps 1985; Urban 2015:26–66). In each

case, their status as ‘religion’ was by no means simply a matter of scholarly imagining, but was also a hard-won *battle* that involved lawyers, journalists, judges, and a wide range of other actors. And these battles have in turn shaped the way that not only scholars but also courts and government agencies define ‘religion’ to this day (and not only in the United States, but also in Europe, Russia, Australia, and around the world; see Urban 2015:135–56, 242–80).

Second, I also take some issue with Gill’s description of the study of religion as a form of ‘play,’ *sub specie ludi*. While the idea of ‘play’ is indeed an interesting way to think about the role of comparison and metaphoric juxtaposition in the study of religion, I think it also glosses over some of the more contentious and less ‘playful’ aspects of the contemporary study of religion. I am thinking, for example, of the contemporary study of Hinduism, which has become an intensely fraught and volatile field, particularly in the United States. Many Hindus today feel that contemporary American scholarship on India is simply a kind of neo-colonial, neo-Orientalist project that continues the worst legacies of British colonialism and imperialism in a new disguise (see Ramaswamy, de Nicholas, and Banerjee 2007; Taylor 2011; Urban 2010). And many American scholars, such as Wendy Doniger, Jeffrey Kripal, Paul Courtright, and others have been not only criticized, but in some cases also threatened and attacked for their interpretations of Hindu traditions. Thus, Doniger had an egg thrown at her head during a public lecture, and her book, *The Hindus*, was pulled from circulation in India; Courtright actually received death threats for his interpretation of the Hindu god Ganesh; and Kripal basically left the field of South Asian studies altogether due to intense criticisms and personal threats (Braverman 2004; Doniger 2014; Taylor 2011; Urban 2010; Vedantam 2004).¹

As such, I would argue that the study of religion is by no means solely a matter of *play*; it is often also a matter of intense *conflict* and at times even *violence*. If the study of religion can be creatively imagined as *sub specie ludi*, in the spirit of ‘play,’ it is also very often conducted *sub specie belli*, ‘in the form of war.’

In sum, while I find both Smith’s and Gill’s work on the comparative study of religion extremely useful, I do think they could be rethought or nuanced a bit in the following two ways. First, the imagining of religion is not solely a scholarly enterprise, but involves various forms of agency, imagining, and contestation from a wide range of social actors, from practitioners and lawyers to journalists and government agencies. And second, the study of religion – particularly in the 21st century – is not merely a matter of *play* but often a matter of *conflict* and occasional *violence*. The ‘proper study of religion,’ I would argue, should perhaps also be understood

as a *contested study of religion*, in which multiple competing interests are at work, and not always in a playful way.

However, I should emphasize again that I do not mean any of this as a damning critique of Gill's otherwise quite fine and important book; rather, I am simply hoping to engage in the same sort of lively discussion, debate, and scholarly reimagining that characterizes both Smith's and Gill's exemplary work on the academic study of religion.

Note

- 1 Here, of course, we could also mention the controversy over Gill's own first book, *Mother Earth*, which generated intense debate within the field of Native American studies (Churchill 1988; Gill 1987; Urban 2001).

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