

# The Glory Jest and Riddle: Jonathan Z. Smith and an Aesthetic of Impossibles

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Received 25 January 2022 | Accepted 17 April 2023 |  
Published online 4 September 2023

## Abstract

The late Jonathan Z. Smith was a central influence in the development of a study of religion on a par with the social and even natural sciences. This article reexamines Smith's legacy for the inspiration to build a proper academic study of religion. It looks to Smith's common use of jokes and riddles, grounded in his early studies of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, in order to tease out not simply stylistic or methodological concerns, but fundamental philosophical shapings of religion theory. I develop a presentation of this position in what is termed an *aesthetic of impossibles*, the distinctively human capacity of considering things as equal or identical knowing full well that they are not and doing so without any necessity for reconciliation. This aesthetic is examined and illustrated in a consideration of Smith's views of comparison and mapping. In an extended discussion, it is also considered in terms of human self-moving as the marker of vitality, established in both philosophy and biology.

## Keywords

Jonathan Z. Smith – comparison – mapping – religion theory

Jonathan Smith and Mircea Eliade were friends and colleagues for years at the University of Chicago despite what would appear to many as their stark and contentious intellectual differences. They were both my teachers. Eliade

died in 1986, and Smith in December 2017.<sup>1</sup> In Smith's bio-bibliographical essay "When the Chips are Down" (2004: 1–60) he explains that Eliade was curious about his frequent use of the "chips are down" phrase.<sup>2</sup> Smith often constructed titles around jokes and riddles and homophones and aphorisms, leaving them without comment as enduring provocation should his reader take (or get) the challenge. In a rare exception, he commented on his use of "chips."<sup>3</sup> Smith offered that his use of the phrase was less urgent than the usual connotation "when all is said and done," writing, as it is appropriate to an autobiographical essay, "I want to turn the phrase on myself and account for my most persistent interests as a scholar of religion" (2004: 1).

There is no question that by "when all is said and done" Smith's intention, as will be his enduring legacy, was to construct – through incisive critique, brilliant and surprising insights, and a vast collection of challenging essays – an academic study of religion deserving a proper place among the human, social, and even natural sciences. Indeed, more than a hint of the dynamics and importance of his program might be appreciated by considering the broader use of his "chips are down" phrase even as it varies from his explanation.

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- 1 Smith arrived at Chicago in 1968, a year after I arrived. Eliade was there at the time, making them colleagues for the better part of two decades. Smith was my teacher, mentor, and friend for almost half a century. Few survive today that can make such a strange (and wonderful) claim.
  - 2 This article was originally prepared for a conference honoring Jonathan Smith, "'When the Chips are Down,' It's Time to Pick Them Up: Thinking with Jonathan Z. Smith," hosted by the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, June 4–5, 2019. That paper turned out to be far too extensive for either presentation at the conference or for its inclusion in the conference proceedings. Eventually, I wrote and presented a different paper at the conference (Gill 2023), thereby retaining the integrity of this article. I thank Barbara Krawcowicz and all those who presented and hosted that conference for their interest in Smith and perpetuating his influence.
  - 3 Smith noted that his first encounter with the phrase was Sartre's 1947 play, *Les Jeux sont faits*. The translation to English is usually "the game has been played," suggesting "the writing is on the wall" or "the game is over." My review of a wide range of uses of the French term turns up a few that suggest that the process is ongoing, that the outcome is unknown, yet there seems to be a greater sense of finality than in the English term as I will discuss. I would be irresponsible – or at least not consistent with Smith's love of all things footnote – were I to fail to acknowledge Friedrich Max Müllers' five-volume *Chips from a German Workshop* (1867–1875). I once wrote a piece called "Chips from a Cyborg's Workshop" published online as part of a graduate student project. It seems that piece may have been now lost in the ether and I no longer recall what I wrote about other than that the title was inspired by both the title of Max Müller's work and (doubtless) Smith's reference to it ... and, as would be consistent, I no longer recall where he made that reference. What I certainly did not know at the time was that the cyborg piece likely foreshadowed my cyborg-filled book (Gill 2018).

The phrase “when the chips are down” occurs, as Smith noted, in gaming contexts.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, it is a term used in betting games, like poker, that use chips that represent denominations of value. The phrase is most frequently used to identify the moment when all the bets have been placed. It is a critical moment of *excited tension* related to an anticipated outcome that will have consequences because one has “skin in the game.” Alternatively, in a darker shade, the phrase may refer to the persistence of loss, as in when one’s stack of chips has dwindled due to repeated losses, the result of foolish bets perhaps or plain bad luck. Yet, even here, since there are at least some chips remaining – down but not gone – there is a fragment of hope: one is still in the game. This use refers to the presence of *anxious tension* related to the pending unknown, the fear of loss. Will one’s luck change, or will one lose the last chips and go bust? Fundamental to these usages is the presence of felt tension, anticipation, or anxiety, even, it must be said, as emotions that accompany addiction or obsession.

This essay title is an apt way to focus on Smith’s work in the broad and urgent business of assessing the status of the coming of age of a proper academic study of religion.<sup>5</sup> I intend the word “proper” to designate a study of religion in a secular setting. The European study of religion predates the North American beginnings. A significant marker is the 1950 founding of the International Association for the History of Religions and its journal *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* founded in 1954.<sup>6</sup> In North

4 The earliest published uses were sports related, occurring in 1932. English Language and Usage’s (2012) consideration of a number of examples led them to suggest the phrase “*When the chips are down* means ‘the serious or critical moment’. It refers to the finality of throwing down your chips in a poker game. Before you do this, anything you say or do is just bluff or empty words. Your action of throwing down your chips commits you to an actual position. Thus, the action of throwing your chips down is the moment when you get serious.” The phrase has also been used almost endlessly, with expansive implications, in memes on poster-style illustrations; see <https://tinyurl.com/mwtzkrk7>.

5 I focused on a review of the “chips” phrase taking issue with the Trondheim conference subtitle: “It’s Time to Pick Them Up.” I suspect the intention was that for the future health of the study of religion it is time to take Smith seriously and I could not agree more. Yet to stay true to the “chips” phrase, picking them up would be instantly declared illegitimate by other players since putting chips down is a decisive action that cannot be taken back. We cannot pick up the chips unless we are found to be the winner and, as certainly essential to my sense of the deeper implications of the term, it is first the significance of being serious by putting down one’s chips and, following that, it is the anticipation, the tension, the risk, the anxiety, the emotion of having put down one’s chips that is the most important, more so even than outcomes.

6 Of course, the European roots of the study of religion, both religious and secular, especially given the anthropological/ethnographical contributions, date to far earlier than the mid-twentieth century. One account is Walter Capps (1995), which covers two hundred years of this history, most of it European.

America, specifically the USA, the appropriate secular study of religion was articulated by Justice Clark in his 1963 opinion on *Abington vs. Schempp*. The *Cambridge Dictionary* notes that the chips phrase indicates an occasion “when you are in a very difficult or dangerous situation, especially one that makes you understand the true value of people or things” (2023). For example, “one day when the chips are down, you will know who your true friends are.”<sup>7</sup> After a Smithian era of placing our bets, of putting down our chips, of mapping our territories, of making and playing our theories, how much of the promise of Smith’s work have we achieved? Have we placed a bet holding a promising hand eagerly anticipating a windfall?<sup>8</sup> Or have we experienced such persistent losses, given the marked decline of the humanities and religious studies,<sup>9</sup> that our future existence is questionable? My sense is we are closer to the latter than the former, thus the urgency of our collective concern. Here, now, we acknowledge the rich legacy of Smith’s life’s work. In doing so we learn that Smith, via his legacy, hangs with us no matter what as our “true friend.”<sup>10</sup> We ask, “how might we both understand the core energetics and potential of Smith’s program and also how might we keep Smith in play and continue his work far beyond the explicit confines of his own specific cultural, historical, phenomenological, and theoretical studies?” As rapper Lloyd Banks put it, “Down,/The paint is peelin’/Now,/When the chips are down/Down,/You gotta

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7 Based on my sense of the field, limited admittedly to incidental experience, I feel that religion as a proper academic field is not in particularly good health and that, should we fail to recognize this, we will also fail to appreciate that Jonathan Smith is a true friend we need to go forward with.

8 I cannot pass by the opportunity to highlight this hand metaphor; a collection of cards being referred to by the human appendage we use to hold these cards. Elsewhere I have considered the importance of the evolutionary development of the human hand with its distinctive opposable thumb – even the existence of our thumbs – as fundamental to the evolution of upright posture and the large human brain that is capable of metaphor (Gill 2018: 1–10). This is an example of an impossible copresence; a hand is not a collection of playing cards, yet it is.

9 This assessment is based on US enrollment data. I do not have European statistics. According to Josh Patterson and Rob Townsend (2021), there was a 31 percent decline in undergraduate religion degrees from 2013 to 2017, the latest years for which there are data, which amounted to “the largest decline in 28 years of available data for the discipline, and brought the number of conferred degrees down to levels last seen in the late 1990s.” It is difficult to assess the recent level of interest in the study of religion given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education across the globe in the period 2020–2023.

10 Abundant evidence is the experience I share with many longtime readers of Smith. Each reading reveals new and unexpected insights and inspirations seemingly overlooked on earlier readings. Of course, this is but evidence of contemporary literary theory.

lose all feelin/Now,/Your head goes round n' round" (Banks 2004).<sup>11</sup> The insight of "chips"? Commitment and tension.

## 1 Proper Academic Study of Religion

The academic study of religion, to be properly located in a secular academic context, must identify the relevant data, yet Smith reminded us, as often noted, that there is no ontologically distinctive data of religion. It is then the academic, as also often the folk, understanding that circumscribes, if with fluidity and contention, the subject data of religion. Religion, a word indicating a category designation, is, Smith held, the invention of the scholar,<sup>12</sup> although, particularly in the contemporary period I would also suggest a common folk category. The various data sets are commonly designated as religions (plural).<sup>13</sup>

To be properly academic in these terms, the category labeled religion must embrace data across history inclusive of all cultures. This global field does not technically require that something religious be found among them all, but it does mean that a culture in which something religious does not appear to exist is in itself of interest. The study of religion must be based on the comparative analysis of all these data that we might arrive at tentative distinctive traits. The comparisons made in the distinction of the genus at the core of the field must not privilege any set of data, especially on the grounds of religious beliefs (the foundational perspectives of one particular cultural and historical tradition).<sup>14</sup> In a proper academic study, there can be no ontologized sacred,

11 This is the chorus of the 2016 rap song by Lloyd Banks "When the Chips are Down." I have to grin when I think how Smith would likely have responded – a cloud of blue language no doubt – to my inclusion of rap lyrics.

12 Smith saw religion as the scholar's invention. Yet, in the contemporary period, the term is widely used outside academia to refer to something that appears commonly in most cultures; thus, surely some broad forces that correspond perhaps with the awareness of global others have given rise to the term; probably most often as an English language word. It would be fascinating to comprehend the extent to which academic students of religion have influenced the folk understanding of religion; I suspect that the direct influence has been minor. Even given the accuracy of Smith's proclamation, I think that a patternist and romantic understanding is prevalent among both scholars and folk, and that is why I believe that Eliade, or at least the academic theology he developed, remains the stronger influence not only among folk, but also scholars, if for them tacitly so.

13 The appreciation of the possible range of what we often consider to be strange, weird, and horrible as religious, somewhere sometime, sheds light on the overly limiting view so common among scholars as well as folk that "religion is good" and all the synonymous associations. Such a view clearly has specific religious, cultural, and historical precessions.

14 I have been fascinated by Milan Kundera's observation that religions are not so good with jokes (1993: 1–34). It is fascinating that while religions are inseparable from the grandest

no divine agency, no dramatic breakthrough events (whether primordial<sup>15</sup> or personal), no romanticism, no mysticism, and no otherworldly symbolism;<sup>16</sup> other than, of course, as these distinctions might be used by our subjects as ways to characterize the data we choose to designate as religious. Religion, as a proper academic study, is a face of human ingenuity grounded in the commonness shared among human beings as situated in cultural, historical, social, psychological, and biological frames. Building on Smith, I have developed a perspective I refer to as an *aesthetic of impossibles* which I consider distinctive to being human.<sup>17</sup> It indicates the capacity to *hold together two or more things, considering them the same even identical, knowing full well they are not the same at all*. This perspective is, I argue, particularly insightful and useful for the proper study of religion.

Perhaps these prerequisites are clear, obvious, and fairly uncontested – well, perhaps not all of them. Yet surely the questions they raise are important. We encounter classic academic concerns even in initiating the necessary comparisons that give specificity to the term “religion” as genus, as a broad category. When we cannot know everything, how can we do or say anything? Or how can we keep global (generic) concerns active as we work on local ones (species)? In comparing, how do we avoid the overwhelm of our own received, and often tacit, world sense? Or how do we keep our own religious perspectives (so often tucked unnoticed among our naturalized gestures) from determining our outcomes? Quoting Wittgenstein, Smith put it this way: “And how am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?”<sup>18</sup> How might our work be fueled by passion and conviction, as it must be, without being but a reflection of our desire, our theology even? In the broadest sense, how do we find the sameness among the difference, the difference among the same, without demolishing or trivializing either? These are the fundamental concerns of any human and humane study, are they not? Chiasms all. In his studies of

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of impossibles – gods and myths and so on – the undeniable character of metastability – the holding together of two things as equal or actual that cannot be – is most commonly explained away with theological argument or hidden by a conspiracy of silence. Rarely are religions inclusive of joke and humor.

15 One thinks of Eliade's *hierophanies*.

16 This list is based on Burton Mack's reaction to his first encounter with Smith; see Mack 2008: 299.

17 I have begun a series of self-published “art books” focused on an innovative format including my own photography that explores various areas of this aesthetic of impossibles (2021, 2022b).

18 Smith 2000a: 40 (originally published in Smith 1982).

comparison, mapping, difference, gaps, incongruities, anomalies, and theory we find Smith constantly raising and considering these fundamental concerns.<sup>19</sup>

I intend to outline a broad dynamic that is present across Smith's work that helps us appreciate how, building on his legacy,<sup>20</sup> we might embrace these questions and concerns to the advancement of our studies. I will refer to this dynamic by the term *aesthetic of impossibles*, although I have also discussed it in other terms such as play (1998) and comparison and the "necessary double-face" (2020b). I will look to Smith's frequent use of jest and riddle for initial insights.

## 2 Jokes and Riddles

Smith often used riddles and jokes in titles and in the stylistics of his work.<sup>21</sup> His Yale doctoral dissertation (1969) was titled "The Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*." He never published this work even though I believe that it foreshadows Smith's entire life's work. He published only one article on his Frazer work in 1973 titled "When the Bough Breaks" (Smith 1973).<sup>22</sup> The title is taken from the darkest most controversial line in the centuries-old lullaby, "Rock a Bye Baby": "And when the bough breaks the baby will fall and down will come baby, cradle, and all."<sup>23</sup> He connects this seemingly tragic baby-endangering broken bough with Frazer's *Golden Bough*, a work of three editions whose research and writing spanned more than twenty-five years – the last edition comprised of a dozen volumes including five thousand sources from which he selected one hundred thousand culturally identified examples. Frazer's title suggests the massive work sought to resolve the question of why "had the priest of Nemi (Aricia) to slay his predecessor? And why, before doing so, had he to pluck the Golden Bough?" (Smith 1978: 208). Smith

19 Yet, it must be noted that these fundamental concerns are not generally recognized by the current strategy of the field. As Smith noted – as did Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (editors' note in Smith [2010] 2018: 126n24) – the current tenor of the field seems focused on area studies without showing much interest in the broader issue of religion. Smith expressed his concern: "We seem still committed to the priority of species over genera, apparently confident that a focus on the former is the route to a responsible consideration of the latter without, however, much reflection on how one sort of expertise might, in fact, lead to the other" (Smith [2010] 2018: 126).

20 An effort to begin this work is Gill 2020a.

21 Including his teaching, lecturing, and writing.

22 The article was reprinted with an afterword in Smith 1978. He had originally planned to publish two articles.

23 I explore this title and the essay in considerable depth in Gill 2020a: 95–99.

spent six years studying Frazer to conclude with the seemingly cruel joke that, as he wrote in a concluding sentence of his one article, “The *Bough* has been broken and all that it cradled has fallen. It has been broken not only by subsequent scholars, but also by the deliberate action of its author” (239). Huh? And in the afterword added to the republication of the essay, Smith compounds the riddle, writing “I would not wish ‘When the Bough Breaks’ to be misunderstood. Frazer, for me, becomes the more interesting and valuable precisely because he deliberately fails” (239).<sup>24</sup> Deliberate failure of twenty-five years work? A failure that deserved six years of Smith’s attention.

I could offer other examples of joke, jest, and riddle titles, such as “The Bare Facts of Ritual,”<sup>25</sup> with its clever homophone, or “I am a Parrot (Red),” with its colorful pun, and others, yet I will consider only one other, his 2010 unpublished lecture titled “Now You See It, Now You Won’t: Religious Studies Over the Next Forty Years.”<sup>26</sup> This title is of interest especially because, not only is it an expansive accounting of the study of religion, but following “chips,” it is also based on a gaming reference, the shell game, or rather scam, sometimes known as “three cup (or card) monte.”<sup>27</sup> A pea is placed under one of three half shells and after moving them around in patterns the game master shows that the pea remains under the shell where we saw it put: “Now you see it!” But then after further moving the shells around the player is asked, with his/her bet down, to indicate which shell covers the pea. Invariably the player gets it wrong: “Now you won’t!”<sup>28</sup> Smith’s lecture reviewed the past study of religion and looked to

24 And should one read Smith’s dissertation one would discover that after spending hundreds of pages documenting Frazer’s failure, Smith concluded with a final section titled “Frazer Redivivus?” that resurrects and rehabilitates Frazer, yet with the jesting inclusion of a question mark in the section title.

25 “The Bare Facts of Ritual” (1980), reprinted in *Imagining Religion* (1982), reveals Smith’s use of the necessary double-face that I have suggested is the energizing dynamic of comparison and the academic enterprise in its play on the homophone terms “bear” and “bare.” In Smith’s discussion of a specific cultural practice (Ainu bear hunting), he sets forth the articulation of the basic (bare) or stripped-down (fundamental) features of his ritual theory and, in the process, also reflects on what we understand as “fact.” Smith’s title cleverly illustrates that what sounds identical is not identical at all – yet it is in the identity of things not identical that is a foundational feature of ritual itself. The style of Smith’s title reflects and enacts his ritual theory.

26 The Cox Family Lecture at the University of Colorado, Boulder, delivered on April 10, 2010.

27 Smith told me that, as a kid, he often watched this game played in the parks in New York City.

28 I find of interest Smith’s choice of the word “won’t” rather than “don’t.” “Won’t” seems more definitive to me than “don’t” indicating that this game is “fixed” to assure that the player loses. Indeed, the game is a scam. This word choice too is a jest of sorts. Does it not suggest that Jonathan is assured that we students of religion are destined to fail? Perhaps that we are engaged in a scam? But then we do not know quite what role the study of religion plays in this analogy. The effect is to stimulate discussion of fundamentals.



its future, yet he did not explain the riddle or his use of it. As usual, he leaves it – as also the future of the study of religion – to us, to provoke us. Is the future of the study of religion and its emerging scholars, the pea, the game master (*magister ludi*), the obscuring shells, or the player? Is the future study of religion, as related to the past, a game of deception? A sleight-of-hand illusion? Or, something we will almost always fail to successfully locate? In considering Smith's title, it is difficult to avoid some sense of anxious tension related to the current unfolding of the field of study. It seems unavoidable that Smith might well have been suggesting that, after all our moving things around all these years, we have lost the object, viz. religion, we thought we were tracking.

Given that Smith loved jokes, riddles, and laughter, it is appropriate to ask the broader question of “what constitutes the structurality of joke, jest, and riddle”? How do the accompanying energetics function in Smith's work beyond enhancing the readability and engagement value of his style of writing?<sup>29</sup> Is it possible that these tropes function as densely compacted nuggets exemplifying his most fundamental theories and program requirements? My objective is to show that, to their glory, they decidedly do.

I previously articulated the distinctions of these tropes:

Jest or joke and riddle are forms that juxtapose unusual or even impossible items not with the intention of resolution, but rather for the appreciation of the effects and energetics created by such juxtapositions. We smile or laugh at a joke. Attempts at explaining jokes are inappropriate or in bad taste or they simply ruin the joke. Riddle varies from puzzle or problem in that the solution of the riddle does not release us from the riddle; rather it gives us pause to appreciate the double-sense of the thing. Often, through misdirection, a riddle conjoins what “is” with what “cannot be” and “getting it” allows us to marvel at the cleverness of impossibles as well as perhaps our own remarkable ability to appreciate and engage such cleverness.

GILL 2020a: 73<sup>30</sup>

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29 It came as some surprise to me at a session honoring Jonathan at the 2018 AAR national meetings to hear quite a few scholars express their considerable dislike of Smith's writing style. Several indicated that it irritated them that he seemed so often to contradict himself. I have always thought these seeming contradictions to be intentional, as constituting jest and riddle. Perhaps scholars, like their religious subjects, have an uncomfortable relationship with humor (see also n32 below).

30 Much of my own academic work over the last several decades has focused on foregrounding this distinctive human faculty identified by various terms such as play, aesthetic of impossibles, copresence, chiasm, and so on. I think my interest derives largely from my experience of human self-moving and dancing, yet its relevance to the academy and the

The structural dynamics of riddle and jest and joke comprise an oscillatory, open, and ongoing energetics. They produce an “aha!” that keeps on giving. The juxtaposition of impossible frames occurs when engaging a relational mapping, a vitalizing comparison, a common metaphor,<sup>31</sup> an exploratory movement. Since the conjoined frames are impossibles, then there can be no resolution in that any proposed explanation opens further opposition. When the chips are down all is anticipation, the felt presence of only partially known implications of a future that is not now, an anticipated with unknown outcome.<sup>32</sup>

### 3 Aesthetic of Impossibles

Religions as commonly identified are invariably characterized by the positing as true beyond question events and actions that, to any commonsense outsider, seem incredulous, impossible. Myths are stories of characters and events in fantasy landscapes occurring at a time – outside of time itself as we know it. The actions recounted in myths are presented as originary, not simply to humankind and the practices and behaviors and laws adherents must follow, but to existence writ large. Cosmogonic. The actors in myths, as also often in scripture, are of other realms with powers beyond any known to the human world. The rituals so closely aligned with religions are symbol-laden costumed dramatic staged affairs conjoined with promised outcomes that, as a distinction, stretch credulity. Religions are often considered synonymous with *faith* and *belief*, the very words associated with likely challenges to their truth. Holders of faith and belief anticipate tests to their convictions against such confrontations.

Practicing our liberal ideals, as religion scholars we usually politely avoid any expression of the obviousness that religions are remarkably fascinating human behaviors precisely because they seem constantly to engage in

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study of religion owes much to my half-century reading and reflecting on Smith and his work. I develop a theory of religion based on human self-moving (2020a).

31 Metaphor structurality is to say something *is* what we know it *is not*. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) and Zoltán Kövecses (2010) and others have shown, metaphor underlies the power of language and its structurality is metastability: holding as the same what we clearly know are not.

32 There is a subjective aspect of jokes and riddles. They produce feelings as much as reasoned halts. Some who encounter jest, joke, and riddle relish and delight in them, others find them tedious, nonsensical, annoying, boring, or just plain useless. Jokes and riddles do not translate to other languages easily. Clearly teaching and reading Smith in non-English language settings offers a compounded challenge, since, as I am arguing, these tropes are not limited to style; they are illustrations of substance.

impossibles, holding as true and real beyond question what in our common sense we know to be impossibly so. Smith however identified this quality as being what delighted and attracted him to the study of religion. His interests piqued by what made him laugh out loud (Braun and McCutcheon 2018: 49–50).<sup>33</sup> This criterion is consistent with Smith's delight in employing jokes, jests, and riddles in his research and writing and to his foregrounding religion as a species of play. His work is aptly characterized as the exploration of incongruity, difference, gaps, chaos, and incredulity, which he saw as essential to understanding the creative power so distinctive to what we commonly recognize as religions.<sup>34</sup>

It must be made clear that to find something outlandish, laughable, humorous, or playful does not denote it as false. Of course, we do not laugh *at* our religious subjects for believing in the obviously false, a most questionable notion. Indeed, the delight I share with Smith, if I understand him, is that the generative creative power of religion is precisely its engagement of such imaginative constructions as the means to explore and express what is most foundational, most true. The strategy is akin to that of story and art; indeed, the religious imagination is often recognized as also of these genres. A significant ongoing discussion in the study of religion, especially relevant to those who spend time personally among their subjects, is how our admiration and delight in the impossibles of their religion, as fundamental to a secular study of the creative capacities of being human, should or ought to be discussed with those we study.

Impossible copresents, while being a forte of religions, are not limited to religions. Grounding Smith's insight in biology, which he did not, I believe an aesthetic of impossibles is a central distinction that appeared in the evolution of humans in conjunction with upright posture, opposing thumbs, and large brains. Metaphor, for example, which is at the core of natural language, is a trope distinguished by understanding one thing by equating it with something that we know full well it is not. Many things distinctively human – art, symbol, language – are based on the human capacity, which I believe is biologically

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33 Smith's focus on surprise, a term that is more fully discussed by Charles Sanders Peirce (see Gill 2019).

34 And now as I look back over a half-century career of studying religion, I realize that I have been drawn to the study almost exclusively by how what we so commonly identify as religion is characterized by this aesthetic of impossibles. I certainly have had no interest in discovering personal wisdom or gaining salvation. What has interested me is the silliness of something so contrary to common sense and simple reason that is so nearly universally put forward as originary and ontologically fundamental.

based as the gift of the long saga of evolution,<sup>35</sup> to hold together without resolution two things declaring them to be the same, even identical, while knowing full well they are not. I call this capacity *aesthetic of impossibles*. How remarkable it is that the thumb-enabled capacity to *grasp* an object, like a hand of cards in a poker game, eventually becomes the word that means “to comprehend, to know.” Just contemplate the immense bodily experiential history in which such an identity evolved. Just consider how natural it is for us to say that we “grasp a concept or idea” when we know full well that our thumbs are not needed; yet the concept, seemingly so abstract, is wholly dependent on thumbs.<sup>36</sup>

In the dynamic construct I refer to as *aesthetic of impossibles*, the “impossibles” refers to the incongruous, incoherent, incredulous that are presented as congruous, coherent, credible. I choose the term “aesthetic” because its Greek root *aisthetikos* means “to perceive by the senses, to feel.” This word locates the dynamic I am interested in, not in some purely mental or abstract realm, but firmly in biology and experience. The root sense of aesthetic is “I feel, I sense, I perceive, I know.” It is a dynamic important to engaging human distinctiveness. It also directs our attention to the biological and philosophical insights on the construction and perception valued in terms of a continuum from incoherence to coherence. It directs us to the nexus of gesture, posture, and prosthesis – the bodied base, the patterned moving, and the encounter with environment – that may shape methods of academic research.

Aesthetic of impossibles generalizes and extends Smith’s persistent interest in the importance of incongruity. While Smith often intimated this dynamic in terms of play as I have noted,<sup>37</sup> this aesthetic is my effort to broaden the scope and more formally develop the terms of the dynamic. It is particularly relevant to the proper study of religion in being biologically and philosophically based in human distinctiveness while broadly relevant to what we commonly

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35 See, for example, Kelso 1995.

36 To refer to a group of cards as a hand is also dependent on the thumb, which enables our hands to hold a group of cards. We may easily make the connection between the group of cards and the word “hand,” yet we routinely do not think of the thumbed hand as fundamental to our reference to a group of cards as a hand.

37 I have often written about play as I find it most importantly and profoundly described by Friedrich Schiller ([1795] 2016). His sense of aesthetics is developed in his recognition of the complementary yet opposing drives toward pure sensory experience/feeling and pure abstract form. He argues that these are impossible copresents; they are paired, yet they are always in tension. As one becomes more dominant, the other exerts more force. The oscillatory relationship between them gives rise to play and thus to beauty. Schiller’s book likely contributed to the increased identification of the word aesthetic with beauty.

identify as religions distinguished by their forte to deal creatively and imaginatively in impossibles.

This articulation of a proper study of religion shifts from halting often forced conclusions, tentative commitments to a place on which to stand, and strained statements of meaning to the articulation of dynamic processes, the interplay of energetics, the ongoingness of movings and practices and lifeways.

#### 4 Comparison

Smith identified comparison as among his short list of “persistent preoccupations.” While he wrote of comparison often throughout his career, I do not believe that the range of ways in which he understood comparison has yet been adequately appreciated.<sup>38</sup> While he used it as a banal workhorse academic method that produced definitive results,<sup>39</sup> he also discussed comparison in much broader philosophical terms as fundamental to the distinctively human processes of inquiry. I feel it is likely that Smith’s writings on comparison are too often considered to be only historical and methodological, not recognizing their powerful philosophical contributions.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps due to the storied history of the grand program of “comparative religions” that promoted religious prejudice and practiced bad scholarship, many scholars today consider comparison tainted and wonder if there is any legitimate use of the method.<sup>41</sup> Comparison, as Smith often pointed out, is inseparable from fundamental intellectual processes. We cannot articulate classification, typology, or definition without employing comparison. Even the biological processes of perception, involving identification, requires the comparative operations of pattern recognition. While academic methods must carefully articulate the terms and operations of explicit comparison as academic method, it is not something that any academic action can avoid since it characterizes the milieu in which we exist.

38 For a full discussion of Smith’s writings on comparison, see Gill 2020a.

39 This understanding and use of comparison is particularly evident in Smith’s critical study of Frazer where he sometimes even tabulated Frazer’s accuracy in statistical terms.

40 Smith’s persistent criticism of comparison, particularly in the works of Frazer and Eliade, unfortunately and undeservedly contribute to this ambivalence regarding comparison.

41 A noted exception is Bruce Lincoln (2018) who tells a rather edgy story of being discouraged by Smith from pursuing his interest in the grand comparative enterprise, thereby turning to Eliade as a more compatible mentor.

Smith gave expression to his sense of the importance of comparison to a proper academic study of religion in the closing paragraphs of his chapter “On Comparison” in *Drudgery Divine*:

Comparison, as seen from such a view, is an active, at times even a playful, enterprise of deconstruction and reconstitution which, kaleidoscope-like, gives the scholar a shifting set of characteristics with which to negotiate the relations between his or her theoretical interests and data stipulated as exemplary. The comparative enterprise provides a set of perspectives which “serve different analytic purposes by emphasizing varied aspects” [Poole 1986: 423] of the object of study.

It is the scholar’s intellectual purpose – whether explanatory or interpretative, whether generic or specific – which highlights that principled postulation of similarity which is the ground of the methodical comparison of difference being interesting. Lacking a clear articulation of purpose, one may derive arresting anecdotal juxtapositions or self-serving differentiations, but the disciplined constructive work of the academy will not have been advanced, nor will the study of religion have come of age.

SMITH 1990: 53

Comparison practices the aesthetic of impossibles in being powered by the distinctly human capacity to hold that one thing is another in some respect, yet what is important is that the one thing is not the other and we know it all along. Particularly in the form I have articulated as *subjective heuristic comparison*,<sup>42</sup> it involves the basic academic processes, including those that give rise to hypothetic inference (see Gill 1987; 2019: 197–227). It is essential to all advancement of knowledge. Comparison in this sense has the structurality of vitality itself. This form of comparison, as Smith discussed it, is the magic of the aesthetic of impossibles that fuels the kind of passion that must energize an entire field of study.<sup>43</sup>

42 In my paper building on Smith (Gill 2022a), I propose two forms of comparison I refer to as *objective limited comparison* and *subjective heuristic comparison*. The objective is the rather mundane and mechanical method that juxtaposes two things largely to discern difference, as in comparing a text to its cited source. Subjective heuristic comparison identifies the sorts of juxtapositions that result in surprise and is an important, even essential part of the logic of creativity and discovery.

43 I use the term magic here in an admittedly romantic, perhaps literary, sense, yet to also recall another riddling title used by Jonathan, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” (1982), and the collection of essays examining Smith’s comparison studies edited by Kimberley

## 5 Mapping

Smith articulated his fundamental differences from Eliade on their understandings of religion and the study of religion most often in terms of the desired outcome of comparison. In simplest terms, Eliade engaged comparison in grand patternist models that encompassed vast difference, yet for the purpose of discovering, or inventing, sameness – a method designed to eliminate or diminish difference. For Eliade, difference is a product of appearance, the varying manifestation of common universal patterns, ones that, as articulated by Eliade, amounted to something of an academic theology. Smith preferred the persistence of difference as being of greater interest and for the heuristic value of generating ongoing engagement both of the subject religions and also religion theory.<sup>44</sup> Not unlike Frazer, Eliade gathered vast exempla sorted into categories, primarily for the reductive effort to eliminate the differences by uncovering, or concocting, the common patterns and principles.

Smith often addressed these comparative operations in terms of mapping strategies, although he tended to simply call them maps. While an adequate discussion of Smith's writings on maps requires fuller attention, here I will merely summarize.<sup>45</sup> Smith proposed that the study of religion, but also religions themselves as he hypothesized, might be understood in terms of maps. Such an approach is part of the pervasive focus on *place* in the articulation of religion theory.<sup>46</sup> Among his most influential essays, initially the classic 1974 lecture "Map is Not Territory,"<sup>47</sup> Smith proposed two common maps of the cosmos, the *locative* that sought to have everything in its place, and the *utopian* that seemed to have rebellious disdain for the seeming confinement of maps.

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Patton and Benjamin Ray (2000). It is fascinating that Smith was persuaded, although according to Kimberley Patton after resistance, to write a short piece for this volume with the title "The 'End' of Comparison" (Smith 2000b). By placing the word "end" in quotation marks he creates the riddle that is an excellent demonstration of the aesthetic of impossibles, juxtaposing two contrasting meanings of the term "end" that parallel rather precisely two of the common uses of the "chips" term.

- 44 I have developed this notion more fully in the terms of "creative encounter" (Gill 2019b).  
 45 I have engaged Smith's complex and profound writings on mapping in several places, most recently in the context of exploring how he understood experience. See my "The Ordeal of Incongruity: Jonathan Smith and Experience" in Gill 2020a: 109–147.  
 46 I have often critically discussed this tendency to focus on place as a fundamental strategy for articulating religion theory (Gill 2012: 193–203). In my recent work focusing on the importance of moving, process, and dynamics, I recognize that place is inherently halting, that is, it stops the process of inquiry and for anything worth our time for serious academic inquiry it is the ongoingness, the opening, that engages our interest more so than the hope or expectation of finality.  
 47 This lecture was first published in Smith 1978.

What has been so commonly overlooked by scholars who follow Smith in this strategy is that he dismissed both maps as each being the flipside of the other and both effecting a halt to the ongoing experience of what he commonly termed “application.” He continued by describing an unnamed third strategy, unnoticed by most,<sup>48</sup> that should be familiar to my emphasis in this article on joke and riddle. He wrote:

The dimensions of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appear to belong to yet another map of the cosmos. These traditions are more closely akin to the joke in that they neither deny nor flee from disjunction, but allow the incongruous elements to stand. They suggest that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction. They seek, rather, to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought.

SMITH 1978: 309

This is precisely the condition I have wanted to clarify, advance, and foreground in my discussions of an aesthetic of impossibles.

There are other important issues related to mapping that further demonstrate Smith’s engagement in this fundamental energetics I am referring to as an aesthetic of impossibles. Smith’s title “Map is Not Territory” is the opening sally of a riddle that is finally won in the final sentence of this lecture: “Map is not territory’ – but maps are all we possess” (Smith 1978: 309). I have explored this riddle more fully elsewhere, yet summarizing, to say map is not territory is to say the obvious, yet to then add “but maps are all we possess” poses the riddle. What might be any use at all of a map without a territory? How can such a thing be even deserving of the term “map”? It is Smith’s riddling way of invoking the ordeal, yet the potential, of the aesthetic of impossibles unavoidable by all academic studies. The academy is coincident with the second order. What we invariably study, what characterizes our raw materials as also our product, are maps not territories.

Yet we chip away at these maps in our workshops with the presumption, obviously impossible, that the print sources that comprise what we study are successful, even perfect, transductions of the sensory-rich realities of our subjects. Humming merrily along we scholars often fail to question the presumption we allow that these texts are one-to-one scaled maps indistinguishable

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48 Of the many references to Smith’s discussion of maps I have read, the only scholars I know who have acknowledged the third map are Mary Dunn (2021) and Seth Schermerhorn (2023). Both cite me as drawing attention to this third map.



from the real territories of our fleshy subjects.<sup>49</sup> Even as Smith opts for “reading” as the primary work of the scholar, his riddle forces the map-territory relationship to continue as an open concern, an ignored yet uncomfortable ordeal. Perhaps, to return to the riddle of an earlier title, Smith is suggesting that upon moving around the shells (presumed maps, print objects, of our subject territories) that seem the principal work of our game, should we ever tip up a half-shell, there is no pea (real subject or territory) to be found, indeed, not under any of our clever shells.

While these issues of mapping were introduced among the earliest essays Smith wrote, I believe his discussions of map have a richness yet to be explored.<sup>50</sup> I pose that this work is essential in that it engages the most important and fundamental concerns on which depends our future existence.

## 6 Moving

For the study of religion to have a rightful place in the secular university it must be grounded in the human enterprise, in the human arts and sciences, both social and natural. As I see it, the efforts to establish a proper academic study of religion have received declining interest in the ongoing concerns Smith referred to as genera, that is, in the explicit efforts to invent and establish the general category of religion and what constitutes its proper study.<sup>51</sup> The default position has become, to a significant extent, the atomization of the field into a collection of area studies (studies of species) loosely conjoined by a largely administrative rubric. In his 2010 lecture “Reading Religion: A Life in Learning,” Smith expressed his concern about this tendency saying,

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49 Impossible in itself as Lewis Carroll explored in a clever passage in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* that humorously considers the consequences of a map with a scale of “a mile to a mile” (1893: 175).

50 My several recent publications on comparison are an effort to explore these implications and to initiate a much fuller and renewed discussion.

51 Likely there have been studies that document this trend and its underlying reasons. My hunch is that, with the field emerging in the USA so rapidly in the 1960s, the only practical way to populate the field with scholars was to draw disproportionately on seminary-educated scholars. The latter then did what they had been trained to do, even though located in a secular university. The demand for scholars likely accounts for my successful admission to the University of Chicago despite my having a BS in mathematics and an MS in business. It also accounts why the field at its beginning was dominated by Christian studies followed by other Abrahamic traditions.

The groundwork, it seemed to me, *then* [1960s] was there laid for the development of a generic study of *religion*, but that expectation has largely remained unrealized. We seem still committed to the priority of species over genera, apparently confident that a focus on the former is the route to a responsible consideration of the latter without, however, much reflection on how one sort of expertise might, in fact, lead to the other.

SMITH (2010) 2018: 126; original emphasis

The academic study of religion in Europe predated, by a decade or more, its rapid growth in the USA in the 1960s, expanding from 25 to 173 departments in just half a dozen years (Smith 2004: 55). Smith, whose career began in the 1960s, was one of a cohort of scholars who, in these early years, offered regular and consistent attention to the foundational needs of the establishment of a proper study of religion in the context of the wide expansion of the field into secular universities.<sup>52</sup> Throughout his career, Smith persistently contributed to the development of theories of religion, myth, and ritual, to the development of techniques and methods – most importantly comparison – with ontological as well as methodological aspects. Given what Smith did to establish an important foundation, I believe much remains to be done to establish adequate bases for a proper religion study.<sup>53</sup> In this article, I have suggested, in a far too cursory way, that threading throughout Smith's many theories and perspectives is a strategy and structurality I have termed an *aesthetic of impossibles* that is based on an important evolved human distinctiveness. What remains is to demonstrate more fully how this aesthetic is firmly grounded in the human arts and sciences, that is, how it grounds the study of religion properly as foremost a human enterprise. I will show that this aesthetic is consistent with and possible due to the distinctive nature of human self-moving.

For decades I have been increasingly fascinated by certain aspects of human biology, not in a reductionist sense of understanding religion in terms of metabolism (Jonas 1966: 1x)<sup>54</sup> or caloric and protein needs (Harris 1977) or

52 Even in Smith's cohort, most were known primarily by their area/religion identity. Among this group were: Jacob Neusner, one of the most published authors in history, studied Judaism; Burton Mack studied Christianity; although Hans Penner was a student of comparative religion (Eliade's student), he focused on Buddhism.

53 I am not claiming that there are no scholars currently interested in and contributing importantly to this concern. Rather it seems to me that scholars with strong concerns for the genera – religion – are few. Even the persistent academic interest in Smith and his work has seemed to me to be rather small. Whereas many current religion scholars know of Smith, his outsized personality and eccentric appearance drew much greater attention than his scholarship.

54 This perspective was carefully and critically reviewed in Barbaras 2003.

some equivalent to a neurological “god spot” (Cognitive Study of Religion),<sup>55</sup> but rather by the evolved remarkable human capacity to transcend ourselves through gesture, language, imagination, perception, and conception; we might call it the *human biology of transcendence*. The specific terms of this biology have evolved for me over the last several decades coincident with my study of and participation in dancing. They have been birthed through the accumulated experience in my personal and intellectual history. Certainly, these ideas are based on the just-so certainty of my own experience, yet as an academic I have worked to understand and articulate them in terms of biology<sup>56</sup> and philosophy<sup>57</sup> focusing principally on dancing and, more broadly, on human self-moving.<sup>58</sup> Biologically, proprioception and kinesthesia (and more broadly the senses) are remarkable in creating a sensory awareness of moving as well as the near identity of moving and touching in the biological processes of perception and knowing. The human biology of moving has evolved to allow objectification of and reflection on both self and other. Philosophically, the identity of self-moving with life itself and feelings of vitality, the corporeal base of conception, and the movement base of perception are convincing and powerful. I have found a clear and strong compatibility between these biological and

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55 I do not intend this concern to either exhaust or represent the approach or achievements of the CSR. In my reading of this area of study I have often felt a style of reductionism and a foregrounding of statistics that seem to me to limit the importance of their conclusions. I acknowledge a bit of personal peeve due to finding so many of the exemplary studies off-putting.

56 Although the development of the remarkable insights of the biology of self-moving is beyond the scope of this article, I must at least mention some of the resources I find most important. The classic work of Russian physiologist, Nikolai Bernstein (1967) remains important. For a more recent work that incorporates considerable neuroscience, see Berthoz 2000.

57 Among the most important works on the philosophy of movement are: Barbaras 2006; Serres 2011; Massumi 2002; Sheets-Johnstone 1999.

58 Although it may initially seem a trifle distinction, I attempt to avoid identifying the terms movement and self-moving. The distinction deserves an extensive discussion, yet here I simply note that self-moving refers to the movement actively biologically initiated and effected by an animate organism, whether conscious or not. Self-moving is biologically active. Movement might include the objectification of an event involving moving or the bodily passive movement of being conveyed in a vehicle. Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses the significance of self-moving in his essay “Eye and Mind” (1964: 159–190). Edmund Husserl referred to self-moving as “kinesthetic movement,” indicating the importance of the felt quality of moving oneself. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone noted, upon discussion of Husserl and others, that a phenomenological understanding of self-moving is incomplete (2016: 4).

philosophical insights.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the very existence of biology and philosophy make the point. As living beings, we move and we feel ourselves moving; furthermore, we can represent and reflect on this awareness to comprehend our moving both biologically and philosophically.

Self-moving, my own dancing, would seem to be my greatest contrast with Smith who described his own self-moving life as limited largely to his walking to the library or to his bookshelves.<sup>60</sup> Yet it is my contention that the aesthetic of impossibles that I believe is at the core of Smith's creative insights, as I have outlined, is biologically and philosophically grounded in the experience of human self-moving.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone and Renaud Barbaras have shown in extensive far-reaching discussions that for animate organisms life is synonymous with self-moving – that is what the term in its redundancy emphasizes.<sup>61</sup> We come to life as movers. While throughout life we acquire a plethora of kinds of moving, we do not at birth need to learn to move. Self-moving cannot be acquired other than through living moving. These philosophers, along with Michel Serres and Brian Massumi, show that perceptual awareness and reflectiveness and conception are impossible apart from evolved capacities accompanying human self-moving.<sup>62</sup>

The experience of moving is the experience of process, the dynamic orientation related to both *here* and *there*; both are implicated, yet with the full presence of neither. We are never *in* any place when we move, as Brian Massumi pointed out (2002: 4),<sup>63</sup> otherwise we would not be moving. Self-moving gives the experience (kinesthesia) of the conjunction of here and there that might, in its halt, become map. Yet in the actual moving it is the experience of an aesthetic of impossibles, a feeling way of knowing the connection (impossible identity?) of *here* and *there* before there is any measurant; that is, self-moving is the biologically based experience of vitality in its virtuality.<sup>64</sup> Certainly, we

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59 I have been surprised that these important areas of the study of moving, biology and philosophy, rarely indicate awareness of and influence on one another.

60 Smith (2010) 2018: 121. This lecture is also available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/K8ZuJ3BdHFk>.

61 The term “animate organism” was developed and used by Edmund Husserl.

62 I am well aware of the cursory character of this discussion of self-moving, limited here to be compatible with the structure of the article. I have fuller discussions of moving in my 2012, 2018, 2019b, 2020a, 2022b.

63 Sheets-Johnstone (2016: 11–14) develops the implications of this distinction more extensively.

64 Virtuality refers to the identity of life with change. As Michel Serres wrote, “the whole of life, too, moves ... life doesn't merely change place, it changes ... Life doesn't merely move and change, it exchanges ... My body and our species don't exist so much in concrete

humans share self-moving with the large family of our animate organism kin, yet I hold that only humans have evolved the capacity for self-reflection, copresent with our felt awareness of our own moving, that allows us to acknowledge, articulate, and wonder at this most banal of our species' traits. This is the capacity to turn the experience of self-moving into movement, into the maps that chart the self-moving experience.

As Renaud Barbaras has shown (2006; see also 2010: 15), developing especially on the work of Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Jan Patočka, self-moving<sup>65</sup> is self-transcending in the constant and banal acts of perceiving and knowing.<sup>66</sup> From this biological capacity arises, I propose, religious notions of transcendence and our broad obsession with the horizon concepts of the other, the outer, the beginning and ending, as well as the constant concern with myth (and cosmogony), ritual, belief, faith, and the construction of impossible beings and timescapes and landscapes in a surfeit of shapes and sizes. As Charles Sanders Peirce argued over a century ago, once one has the capacity to conceive *outside* – Sheets-Johnstone (2010) argues that it is perhaps our first corporeal concept and which I am arguing is based in evolved human biology – then a half hour's musement (Peirce's phrase) quickly leads to the positing of some ultimate outside. It is the inevitable outcome of the just-so impossibility that some inside has no outside. And it is fascinating that this ultimate outside is as much an impossible for physicists as it is for the clodhopper (also Peirce's term) or the theologian (Peirce 1934).<sup>67</sup>

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reality as in 'potency' or virtuality" (2011: 50–52). Virtuality refers to the moving, the ongoing dynamic, aspect of movement. The self-moving human body can be understood as *incorporeal corporeality* as Brian Massumi suggested (2002: 5) in his aptly titled, for this point, book.

65 He termed it "living movement."

66 The awareness of the virtuality of moving is an awareness beyond the mere physicality of biomechanics. Massumi (2002) discusses what I have termed "incorporeal corporeality," and Sheets-Johnstone (2010) demonstrates the corporeality of concepts, that is, that concepts are at base dependent on Earth resident human distinctive biology. She argues that "in," and I would pair that necessarily with "out," is likely our first concept, but early as well are the relational concepts in front/behind, above/below, before/after, and so on. The concept transcendence, rooted in Latin *scandere* meaning to climb, is based in corporeal actions that incorporate the corporeal orientational concepts up/down.

67 The late physicist Stephen Hawking and others sometimes contemplated a grand theory of everything (GTE), a sort of complex mathematical formula that would calculate the condition of anything at any place and any time including the very invention of the GTE formula itself. Hawking saw this formulation as the end of science ([1988] 2011). And, of course, physicists' imagination of the Big Bang is a singularity which literally means it is a nonlinearity, the Big Nonlinearity. Most certainly both words, in what must be but metaphor, "big" and "bang" are corporeally based and relative. Big compared with what and by

Another aspect of an aesthetic of impossibles is shared with moving. As process, the energetics of moving may be charted by the halting transduction of process into event, yet ongoingness is characterized by the presence of the unpredictable, the creative influence of accident, the presence of random influences. The word *nonlinearity* is a technical term that refers to the unpredictable, the unexpected, the surprises, the novelties, the randomness that occurs in any complex self-regulating network from the nervous system to the animate organism to societies including religions. Nonlinearity too is inspired by moving; since moving is not in any place, there is a necessary element of the unexpected and unpredictable in the very essence of moving; the tension of the unknown felt when “the chips are down.” Nonlinearities are what laboratories seek to eliminate or isolate and what academic theories and definitions seek to normalize and reduce. Yet nonlinearity is an essential part of any system, and, in my view, it exists at the core of change and creativity, an essential for novelty as also vitality. History and biography and even scientific theory may articulate recognizable patterns, yet our interest in such accounts is always drawn to those occasions where nonlinearity becomes apparent and impactful. In religious contexts nonlinearity is essential to the excitement implicated in such notions as free will, fate, destiny, evil, belief, miracle, and death. In a completely predictable world, a world absent of nonlinearity, none of these terms would have any play at all.

Smith’s delight in joke, jest, riddle, play, comparison, mapping, and difference is his embrace of nonlinearity and metastability. “When the chips are down” is energized by the presence of chance, of the nonlinearity of the outcome. The nonlinearity of an aesthetic of impossibles is the perpetuation of the conditions at that moment of having just put one’s chips down. Despite Smith’s preference for “reading” and the armchair work that restricts his subject to the transduced phenomena of print – seemingly both his avoidance of, even disdain for, sensory-rich experience (the actual territories) as well as self-movement – careful analysis shows that the energetics of both experience and moving are fundamental to his program throughout his writing, evidence of the presence of both, if in unexpected ways.<sup>68</sup>

Given his academic theology of religion, Mircea Eliade did not care much for history because of its relativity and nonlinearity; that is, its humanity. His theory of religion was one that identifies the presence of nonlinearity – its

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whom? There is nothing there. Who was there to hear the “bang”? If there is a bang in the “nothing,” does it make a sound? Much fun at the expense of serious physicists.

68 I have developed this analysis in Gill 2020a, particularly the chapters on comparison and experience.

relativity, its conflict and variance from the perfect world of godly creation – with humans and their penchant for the messy work of making, or perhaps accidenting, history.<sup>69</sup> Eliade's notion of religion seems the antidote to the nonlinearity inseparable from human beings moving themselves about, often unpredictably, all the time. Eliade seemed to allow creativity only if it is a replication of godly creation – and that seems to pretty much eliminate novelty and also much of what characterizes human beings! Eliade stood in a very long tradition of equating religion with perfection, or at the least with “the good.” Religion is the special, the extraordinary. Our cultural and religious gestural naturalization of this perspective with its paired body of concepts is, I believe, among our greatest obstacles to the development of a proper academic study of religion.

Smith preferred the development of religion as a proper academic study. One that would situate religion in a world that includes, that is even characterized by, chaos and incongruity and difference and the potential for disorder. In its proper study, religion must be found in the most banal of human situations arising due to the unexpected, the unpredictable, the surprises that require the artful application of its guiding strategies often embedded gesturally in data we classify as rituals and stories. In the proper academic study of religions, as also the invented category itself, religion is characterized as moving dynamic series of change – as vitalizing processes and insights into life itself. Fundamental to the formalization of these moving processes, crucial to comprehending and appreciating the delightful impossibilities of both religion and its proper study, important to our invention of a strategy to engage at once both genera and species (religion and religions), is to build on Jonathan Smith by embracing and articulating the dynamics and details of an aesthetic of impossibles.

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69 The notion of human making, particularly as it relates to technology, is at the center of Gill 2018.

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