

Imagining a Proper Academic Study of Religion Inspired by Jonathan Z. Smith¹

Jonathan Z. Smith is widely acknowledged as among most influential scholars in the academic study of religion in the last half century. His research and publication span many fields and his contributions to theory and to pedagogy have been widely discussed and debated.² Smith died December 30, 2017. While a thorough and critical study of Smith's entire body of work does not yet exist, it is certainly appropriate and timely for those who knew him and those who are presently engaged by his work to begin to assess and realize the promise of his legacy. What have been his contributions and how are they valued? Which of his contributions remain actively influential to the study of religion? How might his works remain important into the future? What did Smith think an academic study of religion should be, especially in a secular context? (Gill 2020a). How might we be inspired to realize in the boldest terms the potential and promise of his legacy?

I knew Smith, as teacher mentor and friend, for fifty years and, throughout my career, despite my interests being so different from his and my intellectual capacity tiny compared with his, most everything I have done has been influenced by him (see Gill 2019 and Gill 2020). On the occasion of this conference honoring Smith,³ I take as my mandate the exploration of several points I believe to be foundational to a proper academic study of religion inspired by Jonathan Smith. By the word "proper" I intend a religion study entirely appropriate to a secular environment alongside the humanities, but also the social and even the natural sciences. I imagine this religion study to be important and relevant not only to the cadre of religion academics, but also and even more importantly to the broader public that needs to understand religion in the context of a complex world in constant encounter and conflict.

Now You See Him, Now You Won't

The odd phrase "now you see him, now you won't" is inspired by Jonathan's 2010 lecture title "'Now You See It; Now You Won't': The Study of Religion over the Next Forty Years."⁴ Smith's use of the phrase was inspired, as he told me, by his memories as a kid watching the shell game, or three cup monte as it is also called, played in New York City's Central Park. The shell game is not so much a game of chance as it is a scam. The scammer places a shell over a pea and moves it rapidly around among two others. The player is asked to indicate the shell hiding the pea. After several successes, the player places a bet. Watching carefully following the rapidly moving

¹ In *Thinking with J.Z. Smith: Mapping Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Barbara Krakowicz (NAASA Working Papers, Sheffield, UK: Equinox Press, 2023), 22-33. This volume is the publication of papers presented at a conference in Trondheim, Norway, 2018.

² The most convenient way to grasp Smith's contributions is in his bio-bibliographical essay "When the Chips are Down" (Smith 2004); see also (Braun and McCutcheon 2019) and (McCutcheon 2018).

³ "'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. Co-sponsored by NAASR. I wish to thank Barbara Krawcowicz and her staff for hosting this conference and for all those who participated. And, of course, for including me among this esteemed group. This paper is an expansion of one I prepared upon arriving in Trondheim realizing that the one I had prepared and distributed ahead of time was several times too long and was accompanied by over ninety footnotes. That paper titled "The Glory Jest and Riddle: Jonathan Z. Smith and an Aesthetic of Impossibles" is forthcoming.

⁴ This unpublished lecture was delivered at the University of Colorado, Boulder, April 2010. It was among his last few public lectures.

shell hiding the pea. Invariably, no matter how careful the observer, the wrong shell is selected, and the money is lost. In a sense the money lost might be seen as payment to the game master for the sleight of hand skill. Smith's selection of this phrase to apply to the future of the academic study of religion is something of a riddle, perhaps a warning. I adjust and adapt the phrase to apply to Smith himself particularly relevant to assessing his legacy.

At the end of his career, I think Smith was less than confident that religion had, through the efforts of the first generation, been successfully established as a proper academic study. The study of religion in secular institutions suddenly expanded due to a statement by Justice Black included in his opinion in the 1963 Supreme Court case that opened the study of religion in the USA to state funded universities. As a result, the number of departments of religion in the USA grew from 25 to 173 by 1966 (Braun and McCutcheon 2019: 55). Smith's fifty-year career, as also mine, coincided closely with the first generation.⁵ In a 2010 AAR lecture, Smith called attention to what he recognized as a concern for the future of the field. He said,

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. (Braun and McCutcheon 2019: 126, italics in the original)

Now you see it (religion studies concerned with genera, that is, religion), yet in the future perhaps you won't. Coming out of this first generation perhaps what will remain is but a collection of area and specialty studies, each of value, yet not amounting to a proper study of religion as an important aspect of what it is to be human.

It may well be that the fate of Smith's legacy is, to some extent, entwined with the recognition that genera is essential to a proper academic study of religion. Of course, his many studies contributing to religion specific and technical topics should also long remain of value. Many know him principally for several contributions: his persistent emphasis on the importance of difference in comparison; his detailed writings on the history and technique of comparison; his tenacious emphasis on place as important to both the study of religion and to religions themselves especially as born out in his discussions of maps; and his shocking proclamations that there are no data for religion and that religion, having no independent existence apart from the academy, is the invention of the scholar who must be relentlessly self-conscious.

Will these persistent concerns continue to generate engagement and advancement? Will the rich balance of his work be remembered? Will his many books and essays offering complex analysis and profound challenge continue to inspire scholars into the future? While many scholars in the field still know of Smith's work, many may remember him primarily for his several most widely quoted statements, his eccentric physical appearance, his entertaining and powerful style of presentation, and anecdotal stories of "Smith sightings" and chance meetings.⁶ Should the study of religion continue principally as a collection of area and specialty studies, the present sense of "now you see him" will likely soon become "now you won't." I think this outcome would be most unfortunate given the promise of the remarkable legacy that Smith left the field. Religion, as genera, simply isn't to be found by the continued development principally of species. Without a strong engagement of religion as genera, eventually the various species studies, or area studies, will fit appropriately in other academic fields where they might be happily relocated: history, language studies, classics, literature, anthropology, and the various social sciences. Religion as a distinct field and discipline will cease to exist. While not a scam artist, Smith is *magister ludi*, showing that what we think we are doing may not lead to where we claim we are going.

It is my goal in the balance of this essay to adumbrate some possibilities for a proper academic study of religion inspired by elements of Smith's legacy.

⁵ I suppose a generation is thought to be more like thirty years, yet it seems appropriate to consider the first generation of the study of religion to begin with the SCOTUS decision in 1963 (or through the end of the '60s) and to end with Smith's retirement in 2013. I arrived at the University of Chicago as a student in 1967, Smith in 1968 the same year he finished his Yale dissertation on Frazer. Smith had taught at Dartmouth and University of California Santa Barbara by this time.

⁶ The last three department chairs in my department at the University of Colorado had never heard of Smith; that's partly why I retired. At the NAASR session in November 2018 in Denver, I found it interesting that only a few attended who had known and studied with Smith. There were several others who had interesting anecdotal stories about the single time they met Smith.

Glory, Jest, and Riddle

The phrase “glory, jest, and riddle” appears in the title of Smith’s Yale dissertation “Glory, Jest, and Riddle: James George Frazer and *The Golden Bough*” (1969). Smith loved jokes, jests, riddles, and play and regularly included them in his writing, frequently in his titles. He delighted in the humorous and playful incongruity, recognizing their power by often leaving them unexplained. I have heard scholars speak and write of their frustration reading Smith by what they say confuses and confounds them. They hold that Smith contradicts himself or is just too complicated and opaque. By not recognizing the jests and riddles, I suggest that some may be missing an important (essential?) dimension of Smith’s treasure that may not be where one expects to find it.

Smith loved difference, incongruity, incoherence, the contra-dictory, the impossible. He said that he chose to study religion because it made him laugh out loud (Braun and McCutcheon 2019: 4); his measure of the presence of certain kinds of difference; the kinds that are impossible to reconcile, those of the cleverness variety. There is something glorious about Smith’s penchant for joke and riddle. It is more than a stylistic flavoring that made him an entertaining and popular teacher and lecturer. His teaching at the University of California at Santa Barbara⁷ was referred to as the best nightclub act in town. His humor always delivered provocation.

The glory of jest and riddle is that they are tropes by which difference and incongruity are kept ongoing (energized) and in their ongoingness demonstrate profundity. The structurality of jest and riddle is placing together things of unlikely or even impossible difference, comparing them in some respects, knowing all along that the measure of difference makes identity or congruity impossible. We laugh at and repeat, rather than explain, jokes. We marvel that riddles overlay different and incompatible frames of reality and find the results clever in a way that keeps on giving. Thus, the glory of Smith’s jokes and riddles is in their initiating an ongoing process, in our marveling at the ongoing play of difference, in our identifying difference and incongruity with vitality and oscillatory movings; infinitely more interesting and engaging than rendering meaning and conclusion.

The richness of Smith’s use of jokes and humor deserves a full and careful study on its own. I will briefly consider a couple examples, ones that might not be immediately recognized as riddles or jests.

Smith’s Frazer studies occupied him for five or six years. Frazer’s work took over twenty-five years. The third edition of *The Golden Bough* had five thousand sources with one hundred thousand cultural examples. Smith read and compared many of Frazer’s examples to their cited sources. He concluded, as others already had, that Frazer had no questions and thus he could have no answers, that he made up or heavily skewed lots of his examples, that in most every respect his work was a failure. Yet, in Smith’s dissertation after hundreds of pages of devastating criticism of Frazer, he concludes with a section titled “Frazer Redivivus?” that is, Frazer reborn, but with a question mark. There is deep, perhaps also dark, humor here. For all the substance and complexity of his Frazer work, Smith published only one article on it titled “When the Bough Breaks” (Smith 1973). The title invokes the darkest line in the old lullaby “Rock a Bye Baby” and it suggests a riddle as well. In the original publication of this article, Smith writes of Frazer “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” (Smith 1978a: 239). Yet, in the republication of this article five years later (Smith 1978a) he adds an Afterword which ends “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” (Smith 1978a: 239).⁸ Smith weighed whether Frazer’s renowned work must be seen as riddle or perhaps joke, yet he was clear that the enigmatic character itself, its author’s intentional failure, was at the heart of what he found to be interesting and valuable. The enormous labor of Smith’s study of Frazer and his one publication on it offers its own riddle, or perhaps joke. Rather than our dismissing this challenge as Smith being himself unclear or confused or contradictory or as perhaps him having a problem in his writing, we must recognize that this very style often embodies Smith’s deepest insights. Yet we get them only if we watch closely and know what to look for.

⁷ Smith’s residence at UCSB parallels his research and writing of his Frazer dissertation.

⁸ After spending hundreds of pages documenting Frazer’s failure in Smith’s Yale PhD dissertation, Jonathan concluded with a final section titled “Frazer Redivivus?” that resurrects and rehabilitates Frazer, yet with the jesting inclusion of a question mark.

Second example. In his classic 1975 “Map is Not Territory” lecture/essay, Smith discusses maps and mapping. After discussing maps where Smith seems to slip-slide back and forth between referring to religions and to religion scholarship he concludes his essay by invoking Alfred Korzybski’s statement “Map is Not Territory” yet consistent with his delight in riddles Smith could not resist adding “‘Map is not territory’—but maps are all we possess.” These words are how he concluded this essay. The obvious: a map without a territory is no map at all. Yet, by means of his riddle, I believe that Smith engages the energetics that should lead us to one of the most revealing and important considerations of what and how we study religion; in a sense it is the dilemma of the academic enterprise itself.

Smith raises the question, the riddle perhaps, of what it is we actually study when what we spend our lives attending to are writings, texts, charts, and maps. Typically, we rely on field working scholars and a variety of travelers⁹ to go “out there to the others” to collect and produce these texts. This description or recording requires what I refer to as *transduction*, the operations, like those of the alchemist, that change the physical reality of the world experienced by others into the reality of printed words, the principal object of academic humanities study. Just think of the extent of transduction that must happen to present in a linear string of words the multi-dimensional richly sensory and complexly simultaneously multi-perspectival reality that we identify as our subject. Smith’s enormous task in his Frazer and Eliade studies was largely confined to comparing¹⁰ their written presentation of cultural examples with the published sources they cited, that is, comparing writings to other writings, map to map. He made no effort to hold the worlds of the referenced people, that is, their sensory experienced lived territories, as relevant beyond the primary, or even intermediary, text-maps that claim to chart some real worlds. His “maps are all we possess” riddle arises in our realization that the very character of the academic enterprise is one of engaging maps that propose real territories as subjects, yet maps are often all that are really considered; a Baudrillardian hyperreality “maps are all we possess.”¹¹

Religion as genera is a mapping strategy for other maps. The riddle, or perhaps jest, is that we tend to claim that what we are mapping is the real world lived and experienced by living breathing people in specific historical and cultural settings. Smith was very clear in not only recognizing this limitation, but accepting it, writing that he preferred “reading as a privileged mode of *mediated* rather than of *immediate* sight or experience” (Braun and McCutcheon 2019: 121, italics in original). I believe that we should find this issue alarming and deserving a great deal of attention. The development and establishment of a proper academic study of religion will require careful consideration of this complex issue that is central to Smith’s legacy; what is the subject of our work and what reality do we reference when we study religion in the academy? And what reality is the intended actual subject of our study? Texts and documents themselves or texts and documents as transductions that offer access to the real sensory historical cultural experiential world of those named as our subject? Isn’t much of the study of religion maps all the way down?

Smith’s frequent use of riddle and jest were glorious nuggets demonstrating how powerful and engaging is difference and incongruity and that we must be engaged by the ongoingness of this dynamic.

Audacious Pygmy and An Aesthetic of Impossibles

My relationship to Smith parallels his reference to his SOTSOG relationship to Eliade, yet I’m aware of my audacity in suggesting any claim to seeing more than what Smith saw. Better, my hope is but to stand on Smith’s slippery shoulders to catch a glimpse of the vistas he found common and to ooh and aah at what they reveal; that and to energize my own work inspired by these provocative panoramas.

In recent years I have come increasingly to ask why I’ve spent most of my life, over half a century, studying religion when I’m not religious, when I’m embarrassed and irritated every time someone asks me what I do, when I am rather disgusted by many who proudly hold themselves up as religious thus indicating, by some

⁹ Some few of us take this journey and its task on ourselves.

¹⁰ I call this aspect of comparison “objective limited comparison” and it is always in interplay with another mode of comparison I call “subjective heuristic comparison.” See Gill 2021.

¹¹ Even the natural sciences follow the same alchemy. They work in labs where they may artificially control the environment and prevent the nonlinearities of reality. Even when they study the real world, the objective is to transduce it into numbers that are chartable and can fill variables in formulas. The very point is to replace experienced reality with information that comprises maps. For most scientists, maps are all they possess.

congruence of religiousness and piety, their superiority (a few of them are my relatives). To me the things, actions, behaviors we have commonly associated with religions almost always in some way engage the ridiculously impossible. Myths, rituals, *theos* all break with banal reality in some profound way. Audacious really because these impossibles are often described by those who treasure them as the very measure of Truth and Reality. I think my fascination with impossibles is somewhat akin to Smith's interest in difference and it offers clues as to why I've found persistent interest in the human makings we recognize as religion.

For a very long time I've been interested in play and certainly play pervades Smith's work (see Gill 1998). In play, even the pretend play of children, the fun is in identifying things we know to be starkly different; things we know all along to be completely, even impossibly, different. A stick is an airplane; a block is a truck; an argument is a war. All kids know that what they identify as the same are not, but just don't try to get them to admit it while they are playing. A god is a human; not. Death is life, even eternal life; not. Stories of cosmic beginnings and endings are set in fanciful places with concocted fantastical characters. I have finally come to appreciate that such identification of two or more things that we know all along are not the same at all is at the core of much of what distinguishes human life; and this impossible identity is a forte of religion. It is the structurality of metaphor where we identify one thing as being another thing that we know all along is not the same at all. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) showed long ago that metaphor is implicit in most language. Language itself is built on identifying sounds and inky squiggles with objects and actions yet knowing all along that the word is not the object or action we insist that it is. Fiction is sometimes described as telling the sorts of lies that reveal the truth. Art is artificial, made up, yet reveals deep insights about reality. On and on. This is an aesthetic, that is a feeling perceiving kind of knowing, of impossibles.

I have come to appreciate that some of Smith's signature contributions to the study of religion engage this *aesthetic of impossibles*. The incongruity of impossibles demands aesthetic engagement. The word "aesthetic" comes from Greek *aisthetikos*, from *aistheta* "perceptible things," from *aisthesthai* "perceive." The connection with beauty didn't occur until mid-eighteenth century, a connection that remained controversial until late nineteenth century. I like the idea that the impossible things are perceptible as in given some concrete perceivable forms; for example, gods as wise old men in the sky or blue many-armed figures. Thus, I intend the term *aesthetic of impossibles* to mean both the perception of impossible things as well as the appreciation of how amazing (beautiful) our human biological capacity is both to perceive these impossibles and that the holding of impossible copresents is fundamental to human life.

Comparison engages an aesthetic of impossibles. Smith studied comparison persistently throughout his career. His interests in comparison included the history of its use, its typology, and its technical essentials (fuller discussion see Gill 2020a, 2020c, 2020d, 2021, 2023). He often concluded these studies by proclaiming that certain kinds and examples of comparison were unsuccessful or incomplete. Many of Smith's readers have not adequately appreciated that these statements are more energizing riddle than halting conclusion. His criticism was not intended to preclude us continuing to compare. Many have looked to Smith's most banal descriptions of comparison as his principal model; I think this a mistake. Oddly, many rely heavily on Smith's tiny essay in Kimberley Patton's and Benjamin Ray's collection of essays on comparison. Patton had to do some serious arm-twisting to get Smith to write this essay. True to his style Smith titled it with the riddle "The 'End' of Comparison" purposefully signaled by putting the word "end" in quotation marks. Some have focused on this presentation of comparison because it appears to outline a straight-forward linear technique: description, comparison, redescription, reconciliation (Smith 2000: 239). My sense is that it is a serious error to consider this statement of method the culmination of Smith's consideration of comparison.

Smith's description appears at first to be a clear and complete technical description of comparison as a four-stage academic method with subdivisions within some of the four moments of operation. The shortcoming however is that as Smith presents a description of what he terms the "comparative enterprise" only one of the four moments is identified as the actual act of comparing, the analogical mapping of traits of paired examples. Of the technical details of comparison itself Smith writes "With at least two exempla in view, we are prepared to undertake their comparison both in terms of aspects and relations held to be significant, and with respect to some category, question, theory, or model of interest to us" (Smith 2000: 239). The technical operations implied by this complex process are significant yet left unaddressed. Even here what appears linear is circular; what is the end in the sense of a final definitive statement might just as well be the end in the sense of "do it no more."

Even in his style Smith engages an aesthetic of impossibles. We cannot be released from the dynamics of his subject.

Comparison for Smith was used in many ways, yet, to me, his most profound was described in *Drudgery Divine*. “Compari-son ... 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” (Smith 1990: 53). Here Smith identifies the playful energetics of calling two different things one, the same in some respect.

Another quick example. As I noted, Smith wrote of maps and mapping or, as I prefer, mapping strategies. Many are familiar with his distinction of *locative* and *utopian* maps; the first seeking perfect identity of map and territory (everything in its place), the second detesting the very distancing idea of mapping. Interestingly, Smith’s discussion slips between describing actual religions (yet religions generally, as so far studied, have a strong leaning towards the locative) but also strategies of religion scholars (Eliade being the obvious proponent of the locative). I’ve read many scholars reference Smith’s map discussion, yet rarely do scholars recognize that both named maps turn out to be essentially the same and both are also impossible to actualize in any real territory. No territory no map. Smith explains this conundrum in terms of joke, writing, “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 1978b: 309) These traditions, characterizable by application and adaptation, as I see it can only be *all* traditions. The very sense of mapping demands the playful and creative process of application, a process of comparison, a process of transduction, an example of an aesthetic of impos-sibles in holding two things the same that can never be the same. And this impossibility is its value. Smith sees this strategy of mapping as relevant to the academic study of religion as well as to religions themselves.

In these examples we see Smith engaging the energetics of incongruity and difference as a vitalizing ongoing process. We do what we do because we, both religious folks and scholars, are vitalized by doing so. An aesthetic of impossibles is, I argue, at the heart of Smith’s interest and his style.

Dancing Darwinian

I have recently become engaged by how odd it is that I’ve always found Smith to be so inspiring when our lifestyles and interests have been so startlingly different. For many decades I have been a dancer, studying dancing in cultures around the world, owning a dance studio in which I danced with dancers from around the world and where I taught dancing to thousands. In recent years my interests have broadened to the study of self-moving and movement especially from biological and philosophical per-spectives. As he described himself, Smith said his favorite movement was to walk to his bookshelves, perhaps to the library.

Focused on dancing and moving, my studies have evolved towards seeing religion as necessarily being also located in biology and correlating importantly with the philosophy of human self-movings, scant as it is. We must appreciate that our biological and evolutionary distinction among our animal kin is essential to our being capable of an aesthetic of impossibles, the forte of our species. We humans not only tolerate the copres-ence of opposites, we thrive on them in most every behavior that distinguishes us and in doing so we tap the dynamic generative of our vitality. Our moving human bodies have evolved, among our animate organism kin, to not only have the capacity to hold impossibles together without resolution (and we need thumbs to do that), as in play and comparison and myth and religion, but also that we may delight in this capacity and recognize that self-moving is inseparable from human vitality, that zestful quality of human life we know kinesthetically. We move ourselves; we feel ourselves moving and we can think and speak about ourselves moving.

I find this evolutionary biology located in our hands, especially our thumbs allowing us to grasp and gesture, and our feet that enable upright posture and a distinctively human relationship to the world, and in our brains that enable us to not only experience self-moving as a living process, but also to be self-reflective, self-objectivizing about it.

Dancing, which in most of the world’s cultures is often synonymous with being religious, can be appreciated as the exploration of the potential of human self-moving and its celebration given the rather strict mechanical

limitations that accompany human physiology. In dancing and human self-moving we can comprehend the remarkable capacity of humans to sense the incorporeal by means of our corporeal distinctiveness. Human kinesthetics by which one feels oneself moving and having the capacity to be self-reflective about this awareness amounts to what Brian Massumi terms “incorporeal corporeal-ity” (2002: 5). The simple awareness that moving is to be never in any place—thus it would not be moving—is an awareness of a quality that transcends grasping, putting in place, even comprehension. Even the simple going beyond initial place to final place as in map and itinerary and change of location—more associated with movement, chart, map—is the presence of going beyond, of transcendence. I suggest these experiences comprise a biological basis for transcendence, the human body’s capacity to transcend itself by the self-awareness of and reflection on the very processes of perception and knowing that accompany body moving itself.

I appreciate that my delight in human self-moving and dancing is an outgrowth of my long interest in and study of Smith’s constant playing of themes and variations on difference and incongruity. An aesthetic of impossibles is the sensory experiential component of Smith’s remarkable insight into the essential importance of difference and it has become a core component of my interest in moving and dancing.

A proper academic study requires that religion be appreciated in biological and evolutionary terms and in the terms of the philosophy of movement and moving. Such pursuits are, I believe, important to honoring and extending some of the most fundamental insights of Smith’s legacy.

In relating these ideas, central to my dancing/moving lifestyle, to Smith’s very different lifestyle, I find an opening to understanding more fully his sense of and appreciation for human experience; something that might be easily thought to be alien to his interest (fuller discussion in Gill 2020). Fundamentally, as I understand Smith, difference and incongruity are not so much given by nature, not so much firmly grounded in reason, as they are qualities of human experience. Difference and incongruity arise in subjective experience as aspects of cultural, historical, and psychological perspectives and habits/gestures. Smith persistently insisted that the scholar’s choice of perspective was wholly determinative of outcomes, writing, “the student of religion ... must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study” (Smith 1988: xi). We might add that the experience of incoherence and the seeking of coherence by the folk who are our subjects of study are fundamental to our comprehension of what distinguishes and motivates them.

Coherence/incoherence and the conditions by which these become distinguished in specific cultures and histories amounts to an aesthetic of impossibles inseparable from, made possible by, the distinctiveness of human self-moving.

Toward a Proper Academic Study of Religion

Smith reported that in his conversations with his colleague and friend Mircea Eliade his frequent use of the phrase “when the chips are down” confounded Eliade. It is another of Smith’s gaming references that offers a riddle perhaps. Yet, unlike Smith’s usual refusal to explain his tropes, he noted that he told Eliade that what he meant by the phrase was “when all is said and done” (Smith 2004: 1). Smith’s death adds a somber finality to this phrase. Added to this darkness is what I believe to be the very real possibility that what currently is referenced as the study of religion—a collection of area and specialty studies, that is, species—will simply be absorbed by other academic fields of study. What is needed is the concerted effort to found and vigorously develop a proper academic study of religion that provides an active and exciting discourse on religion as genera—that is, the discourse on religion as a distinctive aspect of being human—as necessary context for the many important areas of study that comprise numerous species. To realize this proper academic study of religion—one that serves to inform both the academic communities and the public around the world—we must devote careful serious attention to the remarkable legacy left us by Jonathan Smith.