

AAR

No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith as *Homo Ludens*, The Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*

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"Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world."

Archimedes

RAISING QUESTIONS, demolishing unquestioned categories and patterns, insisting that discerning difference is fundamental to comparison—these are the trademarks of Jonathan Z. Smith's scholarship. His perspective and the accompanying academic operations foster studies that produce theory in religion, theory that I will argue might well be understood in terms of play.¹

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¹ Quite obviously from the title, my concern is with play and how it characterizes not only Smith's work but also with how the academic study of religion would benefit significantly by adopting a play theory of religion. This focus immediately raises the difficult question of what I understand as play. My readers will demand definition of me at the outset. I am convinced that our attempts to define such words as religion and play have gone so terribly sour because we have approached them from the assumptions of classical category theory. George Lakoff discusses the limitations of the classical theory and offers a prototype theory as a more useful alternative. Though it would take much more space than

Juxtaposition is Smith's initiating operation. He sets two or more "things" side by side—texts, interpretations, quotations and their sources, ideas, and approaches. Juxtaposition is more than placing two things in adjacent spaces. Juxtaposition is a placement that implies relationship. Juxtaposition is the necessary precondition to comparison. It demands comparison. An effective juxtaposition engages a tension among the items juxtaposed, a tension that raises questions not easily answered. In an engaging juxtaposition there is movement back and forth among the elements. An interplay.

In comparison the acceptance of *difference* is the grounds of its being interesting, creative, and important. Difference drives the interplay. Smith conceives this difference most commonly in such terms as incongruity, lack of fit, and incredulity. He frequently invokes Paul Ricoeur's axiom "incongruity gives rise to thought," or as he has stated more formally: there is through comparison "a methodical manipulation of that difference to achieve some stated cognitive end" (1987:14).

Juxtaposition frames the comparative enterprise. Difference fuels comparison. To initiate and maintain the playful process is as important as forcing it to precipitate some unwarranted conclusion. The thoughtful process generates theory and insight.

Smith does not limit this dynamic process to the technical academic methods of a student of religion and culture. He recognizes that they are present as well in the structures of religious experience. His analyses tend to move easily between the study of some aspect of a specific religious tradition and the study of religion itself and, even more broadly, the whole educational process.

Smith also shifts back and forth between the study of religion and academic self-criticism. But the method is constant: juxtaposition (comparison), difference (incongruity or incredulity), thought (reflection).²

a note or even an article to deal with a definition of play, I must here say at least that for historical and cultural reasons we tend to see what we understand as the distinctive actions of children as one of our principal prototypes for play. Thus, the playground and children running seemingly randomly about the space provide one prototype from which we develop the idea that play is like a back and forth movement without apparent intent or final goal. Games provide another prototype. The play of a game is that action and interaction that result from holding together two opposing forces. When one conquers or dominates in a way the other cannot possibly overcome, there is no longer play. From this prototype we associate play with all sorts of dialogical structures, offering for example an alternative to hierarchical dualities such as right and wrong and good and evil. While this essay is not specifically on defining play, I will point out as I go along some of the elements of play, their operative prototypes, and their academic heritages. It will be a nontechnical discussion of play that must await another work for a more satisfying and complete consideration.

² I always have the desire to add to Smith's focus on thought by including action. Action, doing something external, would include writing and discourse in the field of scholarship and a whole range of human action in the religious field. As I will note later, however, Smith's work is self-consciously focused upon text and scholarship where, likely, it has seemed to him thought is an adequate descriptor.

Numerous pairs are played against each other: 1) the entities juxtaposed for comparison, 2) the deconstructive and reconstructive phases (that is, difference and thought or incongruity and reflection), 3) the study of religious phenomena and the self-conscious analysis of academic method, and 4) the subject and the object of the enterprise. Smith's approach depends in the most basic way upon juxtaposition, upon the holding together of two things that cannot easily subsume one another. He does not seek some final resolution but rather an occasional clarification, even the revelation of more interesting juxtapositions.³

RELIGION AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Smith's approach to religion can be considered *sub specie ludi*. Play is an important element running through Jonathan Smith's study of religion; key both to appreciating and critically evaluating his work. Furthermore, understanding Smith's notion of play has implications for other recitings of religion, notably Milan Kundera's as I will show.

Religion, as Smith understands it, is a mode of human creativity.

What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning, worlds within which men find themselves and in which they choose to dwell. What we study is the passion and drama of man discovering the truth of what it is to be human. History is the framework within whose perimeter those human expressions, activities and intentionalities that we call "religious" occur. Religion is the quest, within the bounds of the human, historical condition, for the power to manipulate and negotiate one's "situation" so as to have "space" in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the power to relate one's domain to the plurality of environmental and social spheres in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one's existence "matters". Religion is a distinctive mode of human creativity, a creativity which both discovers limits and creates limits for humane existence. What we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation. (1978c:290-291)⁴

And, according to Smith,

³ It seems rather clear that the prototype of play that is most operative here is that of play in game. Similar views of play date as early as Friedrich Schiller in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in which he posited a series of paired drives—such as the formal and sensuous drives—which, when engaged with one another gave rise to a third drive, the *Spieltrieb*. Charles Sanders Peirce, who attributes his understanding of play to Schiller's influence (see Hardwick: 64), sees play as "musement," and I believe that for him play was nearly synonymous with the inferential method he called "abduction." I wonder if the whole tertiary structure of his philosophy does not reflect this perspective on play.

⁴ The paper was delivered as a lecture in May, 1974.

Man . . . has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion. That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion . . . must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.

For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as *exempli gratia* of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion. (1982b:xi)

With respect to religion Smith shows us that the playful character of being human is exemplified as an oscillation⁵ among an array of active and passive, willful and receptive attributes: activities and intentionalities, invention and participation, creation and discovery, quest and location, manipulate and negotiate, construct and map, analysis and reflective imagination. The activities, expressions, and intentionalities that are considered to be religious take such forms as myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation. These actions are not distinguished by any unique religiousness, they are open to analysis as religious in terms of their characterization of worlds, situations, spaces, domains, spheres, powers, and positions. The study of religion parallels its practice and experience. As religion is an "attempt to map, construct and inhabit . . . positions of power," the study of religion is an attempt to map those data that are chosen to exemplify religion. Whereas religion maps, constructs, and inhabits "through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation," the study of religion maps through the "imaginative acts of comparison and generalization." Myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation are structurally parallel to academic theories and methods.⁶ It is not the reli-

⁵ Oscillation is common to the view of play that develops on the prototype of the actions distinctive of children. This view of play is used by Hans-Georg Gadamer (91-119) in his consideration of the ontology of art.

⁶ "For a student of religion concerned with generic matters, choice is everything. Such a student is bound neither by the demarcations of a given canon nor by the limits of a historic community in constituting the domain of the argument or the field of the illuminating example. Rather, it is the theoretical issues that determine the horizon. In the work before you the primary question will be a matter of theory: the issue of ritual and its relation to place" (Smith 1987: xi-xii).

giousness of the data that directs the study of religion, it is the imaginative and self-conscious selection of theory.⁷

Throughout his work, Smith's concern, given his view of religion, is where the academic stands in her or his endeavor. Hence, it is no surprise that the issue of "place" is a persistent topic.

PLACE

Smith's critical examination of Mircea Eliade's most basic and universal pattern and symbolism—the "center"—began as early as 1971 in a lecture entitled "The Wobbling Pivot," in which he suggested that Eliade overemphasized the center to the exclusion of other place categories.⁸ He presented a series of queries and applications intended to complement and extend Eliade's conception. Smith attributes to Eliade a generative theory of religion: "The question of the character of the place on which one stands is *the* fundamental question as Eliade has taught us" (1978f:103). Perhaps Smith learned this from Eliade, but his various analyses of Eliade's studies of religion show that, for Eliade, it was a question not so much posed as it was a question to which he provided what he and many others have considered the definitive answer.⁹

A statement made by Claude Levi-Strauss is likely the more important and persistent inspiration for the formation and development of Smith's concerns with the interconnection of "place" and the analysis of religious experience.¹⁰ As early as 1968 in a lecture entitled "Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?" and as recently as the preface to *To Take Place*, and several times in between, Smith quotes the following passage from Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*: "A native thinker makes the penetrating comment that 'All sacred things must have their place.' It could even be said that being in their place is what makes them sacred for if they were taken out of their place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed.

⁷ Perhaps I should not over-complicate the presentation at this point, but I must at least note that taking Smith's priorities seriously means that these parallels between religion and the study of religion are also the product of a self-conscious selection of theory. It is not that religion has some inherent nature or essence, it is that religion takes on this profile according to the way Smith chooses to construct the data he considers relevant to his theory of religion.

⁸ Smith regularly uses Eliade as the foil against which to articulate his understanding of religion and the academic study of religion. I find that the juxtaposition and comparison of the two figures and their works are an effective way to consider critically two major positions within the academic study of religion. I have comparatively examined both their views of place (in press; and 1998, chap. 7).

⁹ As I will repeatedly point out, the essentialist aspect of Eliade's work greatly limits his playfulness.

¹⁰ Smith also frequently cites the statement attributed to Archimedes that serves as epigram for this article and occasionally a statement by Mary Douglas: "Holiness is exemplified by correctness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused" (53).

Sacred objects therefore contribute to the maintenance of order in the universe by occupying the places allocated to them. Examined superficially and from the outside, the refinements of ritual can appear pointless. They are explicable by a concern for what one might call 'micro-adjustment'—the concern to assign every single creature, object or feature to a place within a class" (10).¹¹

There is for Smith a high potential for insight when students of religion attend to categories of place. The designation of meaning, sometimes referred to as "sacrality," is related to place. The language of symbol and social structure expresses an individual's or a culture's vision of its place. Place is articulated in the act of creating and discovering worlds of meaning (see 1978b:141, 145). Whereas Mircea Eliade equates the "sacred" with the place category of the center, Smith enriches and even confounds this simple identity. Whereas Levi-Strauss equates the "sacred" with "being in place," this is but the beginning for Smith.

Smith articulates a notion of place in the terms of two categories he labels "locative" and "utopian." A *locative* vision of the world emphasizes place (1978f:101). A *utopian* vision of the world emphasizes the value of being in no place (1978f:101).

Those myths and rituals which belong to a locative map of the cosmos labor to overcome all incongruity by assuming the interconnectedness of all things, the adequacy of symbolization . . . and the power and possibility of repetition. They allow for moments of ritualized disjunction, but these are part of a highly structured scenario (initiation, New Year) in which the disjunctive (identified with the liminal or chaotic) will be overcome through recreation. (1978c:308-309)

A utopian map of the cosmos is developed which perceives terror and confinement in interconnection, correspondence and repetition. The moments of disjunction become coextensive with finite existence and the world is perceived to be chaotic, reversed, liminal. Rather than celebration, affirmation and repetition, man turns in rebellion and flight to a new world and a new mode of creation. (1978c:309)

Although Smith emphasizes that taken together these maps present the basic dichotomy among religions (and he exemplifies them with specific religious traditions), one cannot simply classify religions in terms of these maps. The locative map has been by far the more familiar. But, as

¹¹ Smith usually accompanies this passage with a footnote in which he juxtaposes to Levi-Strauss's statement the text from the Pawnee Hako as recorded by Alice Fletcher on which Levi-Strauss based his statement. Juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought lead Smith to conclude that: "It is not, in this account, being-in-their-place which confers sacrality as Levi-Strauss suggests" (1978b:137 n.26).

Smith notes, this reflects the way in which the study of religion has been approached.¹²

The locative map is necessarily a centered map. It depends upon some order or set of organizing principles, that is, some center whether or not it is spatially marked. Eliade proclaimed an identity between the "sacred" and this locative, centered, map of the world. He contrasted all other maps as "profane" or non-religious. In "The Wobbling Pivot" Smith suggests that the elements of chaos, which Eliade identified as profane, can be more effectively comprehended in the context of a religious worldview. Chaos, Smith says, "is a sacred power; but it is frequently perceived as being sacred 'in the wrong way'" (1978f:97). He cites the myth of the charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus* (253-254) to illustrate his argument: "If one had only the white horse of decorum, temperance, and restraint, he would never reach heaven and the gods. If one had only the lawless black horse, he would rape the gods when he appeared before them. Without the black horse there would be neither motion nor life; without the white horse there would be no limits" (1978f:97).

Smith holds that there is an interdependence between the locative center-oriented map and the utopian chaos-generating map. He links the sacred and the chaotic (rather than the profane), and thus shows that there is a religiousness to being out of place as well as to being in place. Still, partly because the locative map has been so successfully and extensively documented by students of religion, but also because of the nature of maps, the utopian map tends to be seen as at most a subtle development upon, enrichment of, the old model; that is, a momentary phase in the reformulation of new locative orders. In "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change" Smith shows that social change is often motivated when a culture experiences chaos. He follows Suzanne Langer's view that man "can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with;

¹² "Students of religion have been most successful in describing and interpreting this locative, imperial map of the world—especially within archaic, urban cultures. . . . Yet, the very success of these topographies should be a signal for caution. For they are largely based on documents from urban, agricultural, hierarchical cultures. The most persuasive witnesses to a locative, imperial worldview are the production of well organized, self-conscious scribal elites who had a deep vested interest in restricting mobility and valuing place. The texts are, by and large, the production of temples and royal courts and provide their reason d'être—the temple, upon which the priest's and scribe's income rested, as 'Center' and microcosm; the requirements of exact repetition in ritual and the concomitant notion of ritual as a reenactment of divine activities, both of which are dependent upon written texts which only the elite could read; and propaganda for their chief patron, the king, as guardian of cosmic and social order. In most cases one cannot escape the suspicion that, in the locative map of the world, we are encountering a self-serving ideology which ought not to be generalized into the universal pattern of religious experience and expression" (1978c:293).

but he cannot deal with Chaos" (1978b). And this seems especially true for students of religion.

The utopian map cannot stand as a structural equivalent and parallel to the locative map; it can scarcely be conceived at all except in terms of the rejection of or rebellion against a locative map. Although Smith cites examples of the utopian map, it does not seem that he is actually interested in establishing it as a separate map. Rather, it seems he wants to show how these two maps are interdependent, how they stand together in complex relationships that are fundamental to religion.

Incongruity, issues of fit, constitute another relational factor that Smith develops. In his "Map Is Not Territory" incongruity is focal. In the penultimate paragraph of this essay Smith summarizes his concern with incongruity in what he describes as a third map of the world. "The dimension of incongruity which I have been describing in this paper, appears 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" (1978c:309). According to Smith none of the three maps can "be identified with any particular cultures at any particular time. They remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man's experience of the world" (1978c:309). This view follows upon Smith's earlier observation in "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change": "Each society has moments of ritualized disjunction, moments of 'descent into chaos,' of ritual reversal, of liminality, of collective anomie. But these are part of a highly structured scenario in which these moments will be overcome through the creation of a new world, the raising of an individual to a new status, or the strengthening of community" (1978b:145).

Smith's concern is more with fit than with pattern, and this constitutes his more fundamental revision. Smith views humans as both creators and discoverers of their place in the world (with the corresponding notion that their view of their world can be articulated in terms of place). This means that human religious and social actions are generated by and given meaning in the terms of fit, the relationship between map and territory.

Smith's discussion, developed in the terms of three maps, would be clearer (at least to me) if understood as attitudes toward maps or mapping strategies. Religions take shape in the process of juxtaposing experience with structuring maps. What Smith describes as a locative map is an attitude that seeks congruence of map (worldview) and territory (experience). It stretches the map to encompass all aspects of the territory, even

apparent disjunctions like initiation and the New Year. The locative attitude would seek an expansion of the map to approach the scale of one to one. The motivation is to find the meaning of experience in the corresponding perfect and complete fit of the map. In contrast, what Smith describes as a utopian map is an anti-map attitude. The utopian attitude finds maps artificial, constraining, threatening. The utopian motivation is to shrink the scale and inclusiveness of maps, to diminish their influence, to find meaning in experience itself rather than any map correspondences.

These two attitudes toward maps are mirror images. Neither is achievable in its pure form except in the most special and momentary of circumstances. When a map achieves full scale it is experienced either as suffocating or as indistinguishable from the territory it charts. When all designations and categorizations of place are eliminated in the utopian moment of "being in no place," there can be no vision of the world at all. The utopian, like the locative, attitude is a process forever seeking fulfillment and a process always defined in terms of a rejected map (Smith uses the terms "rebellion" and "flight" and the examples "gnostic reevaluation" and "yogic reversal").

In this place-founded imagination of religion, map, whatever its kind, is indispensable. What Smith shows is that there is a range of attitudes about the relationship between map and territory spanning a domain defined by ideals at the opposing extremes which he terms "locative" and "utopian." Smith's insight has been to shift the study of religion from a classification of map types, of the identification of religion with one map coordinate, to an examination of the dynamics of the relationships between maps (worldviews) and territories (human experiences). It is to see that religiousness occurs in the play between map and territory, worldview and experience. Juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought.

The third, yet unnamed, map that Smith describes is not so much a third ideal, though technically Smith presents it as such, as it is a necessary product of Smith's analytical scheme. This position, as Smith envisions this religious map, allows "that symbolism, myth, ritual, repetition, transcendence are all incapable of overcoming disjunction." However, following my argument, in the face of the impossible (or at best rare and momentary) achievement of either the locative or utopian ideals, the only positive alternative is to "allow the incongruous elements to stand." Here the incongruity is not only that between map and territory but between either ideal goal and its respective accomplishment.

One may choose to limit religion to those rare moments of achieving the locative or utopian goals (as in happily accepted complete dogmatism or rarefied mystical moments) and to the more or less tragic strivings toward these ideals. This has been a common choice of students of religion

and it remains a popular notion. Smith shows students of religion the double-face, the holding together of tragedy and comedy. Without rejecting a basically tragic view, one may complement it with a comic and playful view allowing religion the mode of experience "to play between the incongruities and to provide an occasion for thought." Rather than some third unnamed seemingly exceptional subdivision, all religion occurs as the inevitable play between map and territory. It is the play of fit. To return to Smith's analogy of the charioteer, all cultures must drive chariots reined at once to the desire to have a place for everything with everything in its place and the desire to be free of all constraints, or, put negatively, reined to the boredom with and oppression of a static and dogmatic order as well as to the terror and anxiety of chaos.

Smith's accomplishment here may be described as enriching the categories and characterizations of place that distinguish religion. Because he presents his discussion of place in terms of different kinds of maps, I fear many may limit his accomplishment to this. His more important accomplishment is in giving the play to place,¹³ that is, in showing us that religions may be engagingly understood by considering the way they think about and act toward the relationship between maps (worldviews) and territories (experience). And extending that, Smith shows us that religion arises in and exists because of the play of difference.

As with religions, so with the study of religion.¹⁴ As religions create and discover meaning in the struggle of juxtaposing given categories with experience, so also do students of religion, but the latter are largely engaged in mapping territories comprised of religious mappings. This helps us begin to comprehend—I'll return to it later—the provocative title and conclusion to Smith's "Map Is Not Territory." "We [academics] need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: 'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess" (309).¹⁵ Smith illuminates the correlation—a locative

¹³ While I argue that Smith presents a play approach to religion, and his language often suggests he is doing so self-consciously, I think the play elements might have been richer and clearer had the level of self-consciousness been higher. For example, by shifting Smith's presentation made in the nominal terms of maps to the verbal terms of mapping strategies, the dynamic relationship between opposing drives as described by Friedrich Schiller might illuminate the dynamics of the relationship. Schiller argued that play arises in "a reciprocal action between the two drives, reciprocal action of such a kind that the activity of the one both gives rise to, and sets limits to, the activity of the other, and in which each in itself achieves its highest manifestation precisely by reason of the other being active" (XIV.1).

¹⁴ It is the other way round actually, since religion is the creation of the study of religion.

¹⁵ Much more needs to be said about this passage. Whereas Smith sees religion as occurring in the negotiative processes of maps (traditions) and territories (human experience), here he seems to be saying that the academic study of religion has no access to religious territories. I will return to this riddle.

style correlation—between academic method and the resulting understanding of religion. In his shift from a method of correlating academic maps to religious territories to include religious strategies and attitudes toward mapping, he demands a major reconsideration of such basic religious forms as myth and ritual.

MYTH

As a category, myth has confused and often confounded the study of religion in that it has been used to denigrate as well as elevate. It refers variously, even unpredictably, to that which is false, that which is held to be true yet lacking evidence or proof, that which is truth unquestioned, that which is the ground for truth yet is itself not subject to such concerns. Whatever the evaluation, myth is generally recognized as narrative, as story, though for most students of religion it is written text rather than story told or performed. Smith's view of place provides a context and background for his insightful studies of such classic myths as Hainuwele (Wemale of West Ceram), Io (Maori of New Zealand), and Enuma elish (Babylon). How one views myth is to Smith "the most interesting dilemma of choice confronting the student of religion." The choice is between seeing myth as an exotic or an ordinary category of human experience (see 1982b:xii). Smith chooses the latter. "In short, I hold that there is no privilege to myth or other religious materials. They must be understood primarily as texts in context, specific acts of communication between specified individuals, at specific points in time and space, about specifiable subjects. . . . This implies, as well, that there is no privilege to the so-called exotic. For there is no primordium—it is all history. There is no 'other,'—it is all 'what we see in Europe every day'" (1982b:xiii).

Smith borrows Kenneth Burke's definition of the proverb, applying it to myth: myth is a "strategy for dealing with a situation" (1982b:xiii and 1978c:299). In every one of Smith's studies of myth he places a story in its historical and cultural context and asks how it constitutes a "strategy for dealing with the situation" faced by the culture. Smith rejects a long tradition of scholarship which has upheld "a distinction between the primal moment of myth and its secondary application, between its original expression and its 'semantically depleted' explanation." He holds "that there is no pristine myth; there is only application. Myth is . . . a self-conscious category mistake. That is to say, the incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power" (1978c:299 and 1978a:205-206).

Myth then is one form of religious mapping. Myth is a story concocted and told to deal with a situation at hand. It bears the tradition, but not so much a record of pristine truth or otherness revealed as the embodiment

of a practical strategy for dealing with a situation. The myth of Hainuwele, for example, is, in Smith's analysis, a strategy the Ceramese used in the early twentieth century to deal with "the cargo situation," that is, the discrepancy between European and Ceramese worlds (1982c). It is in this regard like the Akitu festival (the Babylonian New Year) of many centuries earlier which Smith shows is a ritual for the rectification of a foreign king originating in the period of Assyrian domination of Babylonia. In a careful and detailed study of a myth recorded in 1907 from the Maori of New Zealand, Smith shows that the myth must be understood in relationship to millenarian movements, widespread at the time. The story reflects and works with the complex, volatile, and transformational religious history of the time (1982c).

In "Good News Is No News," myth is an important analytical category in Smith's examination of the relationship between Greco-Roman aretalogies, "collections of model hagiographies and paradoxographies widespread in the period of Late Antiquity," and Christian gospels. Smith bases his comparative study of these literatures on the recognition that both are dealing with situations at hand, that their power rests in the acknowledgement of discrepancy. Thus, both may be seen in the terms of myth. In the conclusion of this study Smith brings clarity to his view of the nature of myth.

There is delight and there is play in both the "fit" and the incongruity of the "fit," between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world that one has encountered. Myth, properly understood, must take into account the complex processes of application and inapplicability, of congruity and incongruity. Myth shares with other genres such as the joke, the riddle and the "gospel" a perception of a possible relation between two different "things" and it delights in the play in-between.

We have need of a rhetoric of incongruity which would explore the range from joke to paradox, from riddle-contest to myth and the modes of transcendence, freedom and play each employs. (1978a:206)

Myth is a bringing together of elements from religious tradition and elements of specific historical cultural situations.¹⁶ Myth holds these

¹⁶ Smith's understanding of the interrelationship between tradition and application is similar in some respects to Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of discourse in the novel. "The way in which the word conceptualizes its object is a complex act—all objects, open to dispute and overlap as they are with qualifications, are from one side highlighted while from the other side dimmed by heteroglot social opinion, by an alien word about them. And into this complex play of light and shadow the word enters—it becomes saturated with this play, and must determine within it the boundaries of its own semantic and stylistic contours. The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And an artistic representation, an 'image' of the object, may be penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them. If we imagine the *intention* of such a word, that is, its *direct-*

together, permitting a movement back and forth between them, examining and delighting in how they fit, or fail to fit, together. Myth is a form demanding juxtaposition, comparison, difference, thought. It may precipitate solution, but its power is in its play.¹⁷ In "Map Is Not Territory" Smith provides a rich statement of his theory of myth *sub specie ludi*. "There is something funny, there is something crazy about myth for it shares with the comic and the insane the quality of obsessiveness. Nothing, in principle, is allowed to elude its grasp. The myth, like the diviner's [referring to African divination] objects, is a code capable, in theory, of universal application. But this obsessiveness, this claim to universality is relativized by the situation. There is delight and there is play in both the fit and the incongruity of the fit between an element in the myth and this or that segment of the world or of experience which is encountered. It is this oscillation between 'fit' and 'no fit' which gives rise to thought. Myth shares with other forms of human speech such as the joke or riddle, a perception of a possible relationship between different 'things'. It delights, it gains its power, knowledge and value from the play between" (300).

Smith's understandings of place and of myth—as well as his understanding of the academic methods of the study of religion—are species of play. Both place and myth, in Smith's view, demand a juxtaposition, which engages comparison (the task of fit, of mapping), precipitating differences and the delight as well as the frustration in the awareness of difference.¹⁸

RITUAL

Ritual, which Smith understands to be one of the basic forms of religious action, is a major concern throughout his writings. He helps orient us to the complexities of the study of ritual by placing it, along with myth, in the context of our intellectual history. While myth was conceived as a study of belief, for the study of ritual "there is no question of beliefs, no

tionality toward the object, in the form of a ray of light, then the living and unrepeatable play of colors and light on the facets of the image that it constructs can be explained as the spectral dispersion of the ray-word, not within the object itself . . . but rather as its spectral dispersion of an atmosphere filled with the alien words, value judgments and accents through which the ray passes on its way toward the object; the social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object, makes the facets of the image sparkle" (277). Notably, the play metaphor of light on the water is, I believe, based on the prototype of play being the activity distinctive to children.

¹⁷ As Smith says, "The power of myth depends upon the play between the applicability and inapplicability of a given element in the myth to a given experiential situation. That some rituals rely for their power upon a confrontation between expectation and reality and use of perception of that discrepancy is an occasion for thought" (1978c:308).

¹⁸ Again, it is important to note that Smith's understanding of myth is a product of his self-conscious choices of theory. It is not a claim about some essence or nature of myth. Also it is important to note that Smith's view of myth would, I think, be broadly and soundly rejected by most religious adherents. Myth, as religion, is of the scholar's making.

problem of the endless subtlety of words, but rather, nonsense. Ritual lacking speech, resisted decipherment. The 'other,' with respect to ritual, remained sheerly 'other'—there could be no penetration behind the masks, no getting beneath the gestures. The study of ritual was born as an exercise in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' an explanatory endeavor designed to explain away" (1987:102-103).

Whereas exegesis has been the mode considered proper to the study of myth, description has been the mode deemed proper for the study of ritual. Simply put, students of religion have not really known what to do with ritual other than to describe it. When pushed, we have tended to advance some notion that serves to explain it away. Smith tackles a major problem in his efforts to shape ritual theory. His theory of ritual is *sub specie ludi*, as evidenced even in the playfulness of the title of a 1974 lecture on bear hunting rituals, "The Bare Facts of Ritual." But it is not simply a direct translation of his view of myth. The lecture deserves careful consideration.

Smith describes hunt ritual as having several phases. The first part is the preparation for the hunt, rites performed to insure its success, including such rites as divination, mimetic dances prefiguring the hunt, and invocations of the master of animals or guardian spirits of the hunters. Commonly a ceremonial or ritual hunt language is used. The second phase is composed of rites associated with leaving the camp. Smith describes a complex of roles and relationships that mediate the hunter and the game animals in the hunting grounds.¹⁹

The third ritual phase is "the kill," governed by complex rules of etiquette including such things as the attitude and directional orientation of the animal as it is killed, the physical relationship between hunter and animal, the acceptable weapons, the bloodiness of the wound, the prohibited and acceptable locations of the wound on the animal's body, and what must be spoken to the animal before it is killed. Smith holds that in this phase the controlling idea is that "the animal is not killed by the hunter's initiative, rather the animal freely offers itself to the hunter's weapon" (1982a:59).

The fourth and concluding phase of the hunt is the return to camp, which includes the etiquette of treating the corpse of the animal (often adorned or clothed); the butchering, distribution, and eating of the meat; the care and disposition of the bones; and the purification of the hunters. The emphasis here, as Smith sees it, is upon the reintegration of the

¹⁹ "The forest serves as a host to the hunter, who must comport himself as a proper guest. The hunter is a host inviting the animal to feast on the gift of its own meat. The animal is host to the hunters as they feed on its flesh. The animal is a gift of the 'Master of Animals,' as well as being a visitor from the spirit world. The animal gives itself to the hunter. The hunter, by killing the animal, enables it to return to its 'Supernatural Owner' and to its home, from which it has come to earth as a visitor" (1982a:59).

hunters and the game into the domestic world and the return of the soul of the animal to its home that it might regenerate flesh for another hunt.

In his characteristic fashion Smith approaches the analysis of the hunt with "some blunt questions" that arise from the obvious, yet routinely ignored, incredulity of the prescribed method of kill. He asks the simple and rather obvious question: "Can we believe that a group which depends on hunting for its food would kill an animal only if it is in a certain posture?" Pointing out that "if we accept all that we have been told on good authority, we will have accepted a 'cuckoo-land' where our ordinary, commonplace, common sense understandings of reality no longer apply. We will have declared the hunter or the 'primitive' to be some other sort of mind, some other sort of human being, with the necessary consequence that their interpretation becomes impossible. We will have aligned religion with some cultural 'death wish,' for surely no society that hunted in the manner described would long survive. And we will be required, if society is held to have any sanity at all, to explain it away" (1982a:61).²⁰

Smith's consideration of hunt ritual, foundational to the presentation of his general ritual theory, begins with the contention that the killing of hunted animals as prescribed and enacted in hunting ritual is not and cannot be a description of the actual killing of animals. He provides ethnographic evidence. He also describes ceremonial killings in bear festivals practiced by some circumpolar peoples. For example, a bear cub may be captured and treated as a guest while it is being raised to adulthood. Under the control of a ritual environment the captive bear is killed precisely in the prescribed manner. Against these queries and observations Smith forges his ritual theory. "There appears to be a gap, an incongruity between the hunters' ideological statements of how they ought to hunt and their actual behavior while hunting. For me, it is far more important and interesting that they say this is the way they hunt than that they actually do so. For now one is obligated to find out how they resolve this discrepancy rather than to repeat, uncritically, what one has read. It is here, as they face the gap, that any society's genius and creativity, as well as its ordinary and understandable humanity, is to be located. It is its skill at rationalization, accommodation, and adjustment" (1982a:62). This is the familiar gap²¹ in

²⁰ Though I agree with Smith's point here, I would anticipate that many would feel that, far from being "primitive," hunting peoples are in fact superior to technologically modern hunters; that their spiritual relationship with the animals, permitting them even to speak with them, enables them to hunt precisely in the terms of the prescribed hunting etiquette. In this view, which remains primitivist with different valences, all the values are reversed. It is not the hunters who have a death wish but rather those who have severed their spiritual relationships with the animals and with nature. What is most basic here is to comprehend that this view is the flip side of the "cuckoo-land" view and ultimately amounts to explaining away the hunt ritual.

²¹ Developing on Gregory Bateson's important discussion of play, Don Handleman provides an insightful discussion of the play function of the gap in terms of being in the boundary. The boundary

which play occurs. In ritual that which is and that which ought to be are held together. Juxtaposition. In this gap a culture plays out its most creative actions, its rituals.

Attributing much weight to the occasional ceremonial killings, though not practiced by all hunting cultures, Smith argues that these rituals enact the "perfect hunt," the way a hunt "ought" to be conducted. It is through their rites, Smith proposes, that hunters fill the gap of incongruity. The actual hunt is imperfect, while the description of the ritual hunt and/or the ceremonial killing are perfect. The hunter, having participated in the ceremonial kill, carries the knowledge of how a hunt "ought" to be performed in his mind as he conducts the imperfect actual killing of animals. From this Smith draws the conclusion that the ritual hunt closes the gap of incongruity. "The hunter does not hunt as he says he hunts; he does not think about his hunting as he says he thinks. But, unless we are to suppose that, as a 'primitive,' he is incapable of thought, we must presume that he is aware of this discrepancy, that he works with it, that he has some means of overcoming this contradiction between word and deed. This work, I believe, is one of the major functions of ritual" (1982a:63).²²

Smith understands ritual as a controlled environment that resolves the incongruities commonly experienced in the course of life. It differs from myth which itself creates and plays among incongruities. Ritual resolves the incongruities that are a given aspect of life, whereas myth engages a thought-provoking process, a mode of constructing meaning. Smith holds that "ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things. Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized" (1982a:63, Smith's emphasis).²³

In Smith's understanding ritual is distinguished from non-ritual in several respects. Ritual is perfect, non-ritual is imperfect; ritual is special,

between not-play and play is constituted through the self-referential paradox that depends on qualities of processuality. "Every passage to play through a paradoxical boundary imputes processuality to the medium of play" (1992:1).

²² Notable here is Smith's giving rare attention to actual subjects rather than texts reporting the subjects. It is interesting that the actual behavior of real hunters (not hunters in texts) is an inference of the application of Smith's theory.

²³ The impossibility of achieving perfection "in actuality" is precisely why ritual must be understood as a genre of play.

non-ritual is ordinary and everyday; ritual is controlled, non-ritual is uncontrolled. Ritual is how things ought to be, non-ritual is how things are.

While incongruity, gaps, and play are essential to Smith's views of both myth and ritual, their respective roles appear to be quite distinct. Smith sees both myth and ritual as serving practical purposes, as existing only in application, only in their performance, only in meeting the needs of a concrete historical cultural situation. Myth offers a second perspective on an existential situation provoking thought and action in response to the incongruity it presents when the two are juxtaposed. Because of the character of myth, the gap cannot be overcome, thus energizing the play of thought regarding fit and non-fit, a play that gives rise to meaning.

Ritual, on the other hand, is motivated by incongruities in the course of life that can never be overcome. Ritual provides the controlled environment in which perfection and order can be experienced, if but momentarily. In Smith's view, it appears that ritual tends to serve primarily a locative strategy and depends upon the establishment of the ideas, the perfect, the "ought," that is determined somehow outside of and prior to ritual, one might suppose in the play of myth.

In *To Take Place* Smith maintains the notion, worked out in "Bare Facts," that "ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are" (109). But here, despite a leaning toward the locative, he holds a more obviously playful understanding. "Ritual thus provides an occasion for reflection on and rationalization of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, what ought to have taken place did not. . . . Ritual gains force where incongruency is perceived and thought about" (109-110). This is even clearer in his comments on a description of Indic sacrificial ritual. "Ritual is a relationship of differences between 'nows'—the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place; the simultaneity, but not the coexistence, of 'here' and 'there.' . . . The absolute discrepancy invites thought, but cannot be thought away. One is invited to think of the potentialities of the one 'now' in terms of the other; but the one cannot become the other. Ritual precises ambiguities; it neither overcomes nor relaxes them" (110).²⁴

²⁴ This understanding of ritual is developed by Catherine Bell. Bell uses the term *ritualization* to emphasize that ritual is a way of acting, a "cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures" (8).

HOMO LUDENS: SMITH AS PLAY

In the collection of Smith's essays entitled *Map Is Not Territory*, Smith concludes many of the essays with an "Afterword" in which he describes his thinking and reading on the topic since its earlier publication. Smith concludes the afterword to his essay on James George Frazer, entitled "When the Bough Breaks," with the following curious sentence: "Frazer, for me, becomes the more interesting and valuable precisely because he deliberately fails" (239).

In the article Smith appears to demolish both Frazer and his famous work *The Golden Bough*. In reading Smith's article one is dazzled by his virtuosity, tenacity, incisiveness, courage, and boldness; one is embarrassed for Frazer, for a whole tradition of scholarship, and for one's own meager efforts too easily identifiable with the sins of the great Frazer. But then, almost too late, Smith zings us with this declaration, a conundrum really, that he actually finds Frazer interesting and valuable, and, all the more shocking, he attributes the measure of his interest to Frazer's deliberate failure. It is a common technique in Smith's writing to draw his readers, willing or not, kicking and screaming (either with pleasure or pain) into the play of incongruity. His study of Frazer and *The Golden Bough* provides some keys to our fuller understanding of this playful dimension of Smith's contribution to the academic study of religion.

"When the Bough Breaks" is published in Smith's 1978 collection *Map Is Not Territory*, having first been published in 1972 in the journal *History of Religions*. Though Smith does not acknowledge it, the article relies heavily on Part I of his 1969 Yale University doctoral dissertation entitled *The Glory, Jest and Riddle: James George Frazer and The Golden Bough*. The title to Part I is "Homo ludens: Frazer as Play." In an arresting display of analysis and scholarship Smith carefully examines Frazer's massive work. He finds that no question, no thesis, directs the work. Hence, there can be no answers, no conclusions, not really even any clear direction within the whole rambling thing. By the hundreds Smith juxtaposes Frazer's sources with his extractions from them, showing that Frazer misquotes, misclassifies, and misinterprets the bulk of the materials he presents as documented facts. Upon Smith's examination of Frazer's presentation of the Scandinavian myth of Balder in light of its sources, he concludes: "I can think of no other passage of less than one hundred words in the work of any other scholar which contains a comparable number of errors of fact and interpretation" (237).²⁵

²⁵ He later would find Eliade's treatment of the Arrernte example "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole" at least comparably in error (see 1987:1-23).

Is not Frazer's work simply bad scholarship? Why should a bad scholar be considered a player? Why does Smith declare this to be of interest and value? Smith never discusses what he understands by the term "play," and there may be good reason for that.²⁶ It is also not clear whether Smith intends his connection of Frazer with play to be entirely complimentary, as the following passage shows:

The book which set out to explain the priesthood at Nemi has failed to accomplish this end. The work which is entitled *The Golden Bough* has, in fact, nothing to do with the golden bough. This is more serious than the simple criticism that *The Golden Bough* is a "misnomer." It calls into question the whole purpose and intent of the vast work. . . . Frazer has produced, in *The Golden Bough*, a bad joke, and, poor comic that he was, he gave away the punchline in the first page of the Preface to *Balder the Beautiful*:

. . . . Though I am now less than ever disposed to lay weight on the analogy between the Italian priest and the Norse god, I have allowed it to stand because it furnishes me with a pretext for discussing not only the general question of the eternal soul in popular superstition, but also the fire-festivals of Europe . . . Thus Balder the Beautiful in my hands is little more than a stalking-horse to carry two heavy pack-loads of facts. . . . He, too, for all the quaint garb he wears, is merely a puppet, and it is time to unmask him before laying him up in the box. (*Golden Bough*, Vol. X, pp. v-vi)

Smith follows this passage by quoting the conclusion Frazer wrote to the same introduction:

I am hopeful that I may not now be taking a final leave of my indulgent readers, but that . . . they will bear with me yet a while if I should attempt to entertain them with fresh subjects of laughter and tears drawn from the comedy and tragedy of man's endless quest after happiness and truth. (*Golden Bough*, Vol. X, p. xii). (1969:109-110)

Smith concludes, "The Bough is 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" (1978e:239).

We may feel that Smith has played a bad (or, perhaps more accurately, a "cruel") joke upon his readers, but he is no bad comic. Not only does he

²⁶ Notably, Jacques Derrida frequently used the term "play" with little definition or distinction. Indeed, it seems that while Derrida deconstructs every other term, play is the one left to stand without this attention. This is perhaps because it is self-deconstructing as in "to risk meaning nothing is to start to play" (1985:69) or because there must finally be some place on which to stand, even momentarily; to deconstruct and play is in itself shifty enough to semi-ground a stance. See Derrida 1970 for his discussion of play.

not give away the punchline, he persists in complicating the play, in raising the stakes. For example, in the "Afterword" to his 1978 essay Smith shows more clearly Frazer's joke: "Frazer, in his researches, encountered the Savage which put the axe to his Victorian confidence in Progress and, in his studies of dying gods and kings, was brought up short before the absurdity of death. The history of mankind became, for him, the attempt to transcend that which cannot be transcended—namely death, 'no figurative or allegorical death, no poetical embroidery thrown over the skeleton, but the real death, the naked skeleton' (*Golden Bough*, Vol. VII, p. vi). And, in the face of this 'real death,' one can only act absurdly, or, to put it another way, all action is a joke" (239).

These remarks are made as an allusion to and brief summary of an article Smith had conceived as a companion piece to "When the Bough Breaks." From his summary it appears likely the piece would have been drawn from Part II of his *The Glory, Jest and Riddle*, especially the concluding section "The Royal Play" of Chapter Five "The Pattern of Divine Kingship." Here Smith writes:

As one steps back and attempts to survey the vast panorama of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, one is struck by the fact that Frazer has combined these two attitudes [comic and tragic]. He has chosen as his subject matter the daring, tragic attempt by man to overcome death by slaying it and has chosen as his manner of approach, his style, a comic playful stance. Unless the two are indissolubly held together (by author and reader alike), unless the seriousness of each is equally perceived, there is a danger of reducing Frazer (or of Frazer reducing himself) to the maudlin and overdramatic on the one hand, to being frivolous on the other.

What Frazer has sensed in *The Golden Bough* is what later philosophers have termed the absurdity of the human condition. . . . Striving to conquer death by means of death, man asserts the reality of death, its omnipresence and omnipotence, all the more strongly. It is tragic, it is comic, it is absurd. (376)

Frazer, as the chronicler of "these efforts, vain and pitiful, yet pathetic" (*Golden Bough*, vol. IX, p. 241), adopts the necessary double-face. (378)

I want to consider these quotations and Smith's work in light of his remarks in perhaps his best-known essay "Map Is Not Territory." One of Smith's favorite and most stimulating tasks is to show the absurdity of the places on which scholars stand to profess their knowledge. In contrast to Archimedes' dictum "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world,"²⁷ Smith has the audacity to hold that "The historian has no such possibility. There are no places on which he might stand apart from the

messiness of the given world. There is, for him, no real beginning, but only the plunge which he takes at some arbitrary point to avoid the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence. His standpoint is not discovered, rather it is fabricated with no claim beyond that of sheer survival. The historian's point of view cannot sustain clear vision."

"The historian's task is to complicate not to clarify. He strives to celebrate the diversity of manners, the variety of species, the opacity of things" (1978c:289-90).

Then Smith concludes "Map Is Not Territory" with another apparent riddle developed on the map-territory metaphor. "We [academics] need to reflect on and play with the necessary incongruity of our maps before we set out on a voyage of discovery to chart the worlds of other men. For the dictum of Alfred Korzybski is inescapable: 'Map is not territory'—but maps are all we possess" (309). This statement is richly complex, highly playful, and demands careful consideration in light of the history of Smith's work. I will examine these remarks briefly before returning to his study of Frazer.

Smith's standard method of source criticism would seem to belie his statement that map is not territory and that we have only maps. Smith clearly holds the cited sources as territory at least in the sense of having priority or primacy over the presentations made of them. But what I think he means when he says that maps are all we have is that he understands the academic study of religion to be confined to the analysis of texts. He recognizes that the most primary sources are still texts that purport to map some text-independent reality or territory. Smith confines his work to texts, to maps. This is consistent with the range of Smith's source criticism. He compares Frazer's presentation to the sources he cites, but he does not attempt to compare those primary textual sources with any text-independent human reality. It appears that Smith sees this "reflecting on and playing with the necessary incongruity of our own maps" as preliminary or preparatory to charting "the worlds of other men," but he does not, or at least rarely does he, go on to do so, and it would appear either he is not interested or feels it premature.

Thus, in this widely cited and highly important statement it appears Smith both embraces and denies the map-territory distinction. He confines academic work to the comparative study of maps without regard to territories, all the while admitting that such territories at least exist. It is that we do not *have* these territories; we cannot have other than textual records of them. This confinement of the academic study of religion to text is particularly interesting since Smith's understanding of religion is elaborated through his carefully self-conscious development of theories of place, myth, and ritual that emphasize mapping, application, human

²⁷ As quoted in 1978b:129. The quotation also appears in 1978c:289.

experience, history, and society. With regard to the impact and effect on the world beyond texts, Smith writes that "it is both wonderful and unaccountable, perhaps even comic or crazy, that sometimes our playful imagination, our arguments about and mental construals of the world, turn out to have real consequences" (1978d:18).

There is a major advantage in Smith's restricting the work of scholars to texts. It enables a comparative task that leads to a measure of objective accomplishment, that is, conclusiveness. In the frame of comparing map with map, text with text, while excluding consideration of the map- and text-independent realities, the results are conclusive and seemingly inarguable. In this relative domain Smith can be certain of the territory. Interestingly, in contrast to his own dictum, he has a very firm place on which to stand.²⁸ So, for example, in his study of Frazer's presentation of the Balder myth Smith's comparison supports the frank and unqualified conclusion that Frazer's presentation is loaded with "errors of fact and interpretation." This stance is taken in many of Smith's studies. He reveals the incongruities through comparison. And in these comparative operations Smith is unhesitating and forthright in declaring presentation of fact and interpretation as either accurate or in error.

But why does Smith go to such lengths to compare presentations with source texts? The case of Frazer is especially revealing. Smith reports that Frazer's earliest critics recognized his failure and that Frazer himself acknowledged his failure as deliberate.²⁹ So what could possibly motivate Smith's exhaustive comparative analysis? That is, if it is a foregone conclusion that Frazer at least acknowledged his failure, it would not seem worth the enormous effort of Smith's analysis simply to verify Frazer's statement. Thus, it would seem that Smith was principally interested in *how* Frazer failed. This, indeed, is what his analysis shows, that is, that Frazer is *homo ludens*. According to Smith, Frazer knowingly and deliberately construed his sources to deal with issues other than those he stated as his purpose. He was perpetrating a joke and therein, in Smith's view, lies the glory of the work. Smith praises Frazer finally for his approach and style which Smith identifies as "a comic playful stance."³⁰

In this study I believe that Smith forges his understanding of the role of the religion scholar. Though Smith is able to cite Frazer (in the preface to

²⁸ And it is not an arbitrary choice.

²⁹ Smith depends here solely, it seems, on the prefatory statements to Volume X which, as he notes, were omitted by Frazer from the abridged edition, thus "countless readers who have read the work in this edition have not been 'in on the joke'" (1978e:238 n. 96). This is yet too liberal, because few readers—one can scarcely imagine any other than Smith—have understood *The Golden Bough* in light of the selected prefatory comments to the tenth volume.

³⁰ Recalling Smith's studies of Eliade, we might suppose that Eliade's failure was less interesting to Smith because he did not find Eliade to be a player.

the tenth volume!³¹) to show that his intention was other than what he had stated, it is actually Smith's study that reveals the humor of Frazer's work and illuminates the distinctiveness of its character as a riddle and joke. Smith does not do this by an interpretation of Frazer's work alone but only through the exhaustive, tedious, but ultimately exciting examination of how Frazer creatively used his sources. This revelation, or I would suggest construction, is apparently worth the extent of Smith's effort, and we must attempt to understand why. I do not believe that Frazer's work can be interesting on the terms Smith states apart from Smith's study of it. Whereas Smith calls Frazer a poor comic, having produced a bad joke, apart from Smith's analysis I don't think any reader would find Frazer a comic at all. We would no more see the bad joke than we would recognize the many errors in his presentation of Balder.

Smith is perpetrating a joke himself. He, much more than Frazer, is the player, the trickster. As Frazer did with Balder, Smith does with Frazer, but much more ingeniously and self-consciously. He reworks his source maps in order to deal with issues other than those explicitly stated. Religion, for Smith, is the invention of scholars, a product of scholarly maps and mappings. While the maps appear to be about "the worlds of other men," the joke is that they are only about the worlds of the scholars who must "reflect and play on" them to work out their own issues. It is, as shown above, surprising to Smith when our work actually has any effect on the real world of men. Smith, like Frazer, is interested in the priesthood of Nemi or the Scandinavian myth of Balder (indeed, he is interested in Frazer and his work) primarily because these subjects provide the symbols by which academic maps are drawn. They were both interested only in the texts, the maps, that are articulated in the terms "of other men." Smith is showing that this territorial analogy reveals what distinguishes the academic enterprise. Religion, as a modern western academic invention, is comprised of only what we write about it.

Through the detailed objective comparison of map (e.g., Frazer's *Golden Bough* or Eliade's report on the Arrernte) with territory (the ethnographic and literary sources) Smith is able to demonstrate that scholars do not simply objectively present their subjects; indeed, they often do not even present a legitimate face of their subjects. What they do is to recreate their subjects in terms that meet their own needs, both personal and academic. Smith shows that Frazer actually recreates Balder for his own purposes, the attempt to transcend death, and that the loads of facts Balder, as

³¹ I seriously doubt that any reader of *The Golden Bough* would find these brief statements as central to framing an interpretation of the whole enormous work. Thus, I am far less convinced than Smith that Frazer's failure was a persistent self-conscious motivation.

stalking-horse, is made to carry are concocted by none other than Frazer himself.

Shockingly, Smith shows that what we have thought to be the territory of religion—the substance and subjects of the works of scholars like Frazer and Eliade who seem to inundate us with factual information about scholarly-independent realities—is actually comprised of projections of scholarly maps. The joke, it would seem, is that there are no territories, or that real territories are inaccessible to the scholar. The joke is that for the study of religion there is no territory, only maps made to resemble it. Recognizing the joke illuminates Smith's view of the map-territory distinction as the metaphor by which to distinguish scholarship. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, what scholars have presented us has been a "precession of simulacra" rather than reality (1ff.). And this work is what, as scholars, we are in the business to do. It would seem clarifying to me now to rephrase Korzybski's statement as "Map is *now* territory," which renders the rest, that is any play between map and territory, completely absurd. Smith's conclusions are the same as Frazer's, the holding at once of the comic and tragic views, the double-face.

I believe that Smith is fully aware of this absurdity and that his work finally does not embrace playing this absurdity endlessly as in a sandbox. Our only choice, as he puts it, is "the plunge" that avoids "the unhappy alternatives of infinite regress or silence." It is, as Smith states, a standpoint "fabricated with no claim beyond that of sheer survival." This is the full force of play in Smith's approach—the choosing, the assumption of a standpoint, however temporarily, and while fully acknowledging its absurdity.

To take a stance, in this complex multi-cultural world, without recognizing its absurdity is either religious, narrow-minded, or naive. To refuse to take any stance at all is either to indulge infinite regress, a favorite of many post-modernists, or silence. The alternative, which is at least more interesting,³² is the perspective of play: seriously taking a stance while acknowledging its absurdity. Scholarship, as Frazer found, is like life in that it must go on despite its absurdity.

RELIGION SUB SPECIE LUDI

So what might a study of religion look like if conducted *sub specie ludi*? Let me conclude by attempting to summarize, extend, and develop some of the ideas suggested by Smith.³³

³² While I want to say "productive" or "promising," I recognize these terms depend upon the old values of moving towards truth and reality.

³³ I have attempted to present some of these ideas in a much more enjoyable (for me) and engaging way in my presentation "The Academic Study of Religion on TheStrip" at the Internet site known as

The heritage of the academic study of religion, what Milan Kundera has called "the deep well of the past," is the western intellectual development of recent centuries. It is distinguished by literacy, by second-order criticism, by the growing awareness of cultural and religious multiplicity, and by the consequent increasing problematization of the foundations of western perspectives. This questioning is due either to the rigorous analysis of these foundations or to the growing awareness that the western claim to truth and finality is but one among manifold such claims among peoples around the world.³⁴ Religion, as a generic category, is inseparable from the western effort to learn how to live morally and meaningfully as modern citizens of a complex world.

Play, as demonstrated to us by Smith as a double-face, is holding at once comic and tragic perspectives, the oscillatory and iterative negotiation of fit, the acknowledgment that we must stand somewhere despite knowing that there is ultimately no justifiable place on which to stand to comprehend the world. To embrace this absurdity is particularly suited, one might even say singularly so, as the attitude for the modern academic study of religion. It is the perspective from which we can simultaneously embrace two or more opposing positions without declaring ourselves mad. Indeed, through descriptors such as joke, humor, laughter, and play we can see the analogy between what we do as serious academics and what children, athletes, chess competitors, and novelists do with equal seriousness.

Smith suggests we take an attitude toward what we do that corresponds with the attitude expressed by other players when they say, "it is just a game" or "it is only play." To say "this is religion" is parallel to the statement "this is play" as Gregory Bateson has discussed it. He expands the statement as "these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (180). Invoking Korzybski's map-territory relation, Bateson gets right to the point: "the fact that a message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes ('The word "cat" cannot scratch us'). Rather, language bears to the object which it denotes a relationship comparable to that which a map bears to a territory. Denotative communication as it occurs at the human level is only possible *after* the evolution of a complex set of metalinguistic (but not verbalized) rules which govern how words and sentences shall be related to objects and events" (180, Bateson's emphasis).

"TheStrip," developed and maintained by University of Colorado religion graduate students. See <http://www.colorado.edu/ReligiousStudies/TheStrip>.

³⁴ Awareness of others and reflections on the implications of multiplicity were enabled, if not directly caused, by the media expansion of print. This is particularly important now as we are at the moment beginning to imagine the effects of expansion into hypertextual media.

Religion (generic) I argue is the construction of a metalanguage that makes possible some general comprehension and discourse about what is religious. The academic study of religion, like the signs that communicate the message "this is play," is on the order of metacommunication.

Humor as presented by Milan Kundera in his *Testaments Betrayed* is parallel to play. Kundera believes that humor characterizes the distinctive perspective of the novel. Humor is "not laughter, not mockery, not satire, but a particular species of the comic which renders ambiguous everything it touches" (5-6). And humor is that "intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty" (32-33). Humor, as Kundera understands it, characterizes the novel as "a realm where moral judgement is suspended. Suspending moral judgment is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality*" (7, Kundera's emphasis). A novel is characterized by humor, implemented by the suspension of moral judgment, and Kundera criticizes recent works presented as novels that he believes are intent upon making such judgments.

Kundera's explanation of his position is important for the insights I want to draw from it. "Western society habitually presents itself as the society of the rights of man; but before a man could have rights, he had to constitute himself as an individual, to consider himself such and to be considered such; that could not happen without the long experience of the European arts and particularly of the art of the novel, which teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own" (8). The novel is a method of inquiry and presentation that is particularly suited to the modern world, a complex world of diverse peoples. Kundera sharply contrasts the perspective of the novel with a religious perspective. The novel in its embracing of humor requires an exploration of myths and sacred texts that renders them profane, that is, it removes the sacred from the temple. "Insofar as laughter invisibly pervades the air of the novel, profanation by novel is the worst there is. For religion and humor are incompatible" (9).³⁵

This discussion of humor is instructive for how students of religion (generic) should research and write. It is only by profanation, by taking

³⁵ This statement, of course, issues from a particular understanding of religion, one with which I here agree. I am well aware that the very character of this kind of statement invites the ire of many readers. The response is likely to attempt immediately to find an exception (either rendering humor differently than does Kundera or positing some tradition, like Zen, as incorporating this ambiguity), thinking this adequate to dismiss the statement. Most definitions of religion are tacitly based on the paradigm of Christianity (perhaps chainlink extended to monotheism). Let that be my paradigm here, because I want to refer to religion as it is self-consciously understood by adherents of many specific traditions. For example, belief in god, belief that scripture is revelation, belief in the infallibility of the pope, any of which may be qualified by academic theologies, cannot be dismissed as representing those masses who profess to be Christian.

the sacred out of the temple, that students of religion may even begin to grasp religion. Given that our subjects are culturally and historically specific religions, our only attitude can be that of play or humor as Kundera presents it.

Thus, the academic student of religion is like the novelist in some respects. It is her or his job to create the world of religion, knowing full well that all that exists of religion (the generic) is what students of religion write of it. In this respect we are storytellers, concocting tales of "other men." These fictive narratives give us the terms, categories, perspectives, and methods with which to comprehend the complexities of the choices we have. Without honoring the impossibility of truth and ultimate reality in the modern complexly plural world, truth and reality have no meaning at all. Without upholding differences as unresolvable, which from the perspective of most of our subjects would threaten the core of their existence, differences are either denied or disguised or glibly digested into cheap and empty universals.

Upon accepting the mantle of storytelling, we lay aside the role of discovering truth, of reporting objective reality. In doing so we must experience the freedom and responsibility of the storyteller to make her or his stories, and the telling of them, as engaging and as profound as possible³⁶ so as, in Kundera's terms, to incite the reader of our work "to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own."

But we are not like the novelist in at least one important respect. The subjects of our stories are real people. We cannot go about our task assuming that what we do does not affect the real worlds of actual people that give inspiration to our fictions. Thus, for me, the fullest range of play, the greatest absurdity is that, because our knowledge is always in some respects a product of our theories, we can never objectively know those whom we choose as our subjects, but we are nonetheless always in interaction with them, as partners in a dance. Our particular kinds of stories cannot exist without our real subjects. Whereas the novel is distinguished by its being totally hyperreal,³⁷ the humor extends much more deeply for students of religion. Novels deal with truth and reality, not as the distinction of their content but as they interrelate with the real lives of their authors and readers, that is, in their being written and read. While students of religion must acknowledge that our writings are fictive, in that they are the products of our theoretical perspectives, we must constrain these fictions

³⁶ I am increasingly convinced that the standards and conventions of academic writing and speaking greatly inhibit the creative potential of our work. We must take advantage of much more expansive and creative modes of research and presentation as offered, for example, by the Internet. We must explore media more compatible with play and humor.

³⁷ Though, of course, there are mixed genres such as historical novels.

by the real and independent presence of "the worlds of other men." *Sub specie ludi*, the study of religion resolves, by embracing it, the paradox that our subject reality is and must be independent of us while our attempts to understand it, in some measure, make our subject dependent upon us.

Our academic play, like any, is bound by the rules that distinguish the activity. Our subjects may support many profiles and show many faces through the acts of our interpretations—they are puppets of our choices of theory. Still, underlying our understanding of what is academic is the philosophical assumption that our subjects exist independent of what we write of them. Thus, academic writing is distinguished from the novel by our acknowledgment that we cannot say simply anything we want about our subjects. As academics, we are bound by the rules of our play to have our stories constrained by our real subjects.

What we write then is hyperreal, but it must also be real. It is hyperreal in that it is distinguished, on the one hand, by imaginative academics creating stories, arguing hypotheses, and concocting theories. All these are fictions to be judged only in terms of the history of similar writings. Yet, on the other hand, writings of the academic study of religion must also be demonstrably grounded in the author-independent reality of the subject. Smith shows us the methods by which we can evaluate the legitimacy of academic work, but, because he appears to limit his concern largely to the world of texts, I do not think he goes far enough to assure that scholarship is held to be responsible to the actual subject.³⁸ Without this grounding—albeit a fictive grounding since it is ultimately impossible and, thus, the necessity for a play perspective—what we do is finally not academic at all.

The "no place" on which we may stand is the fictive narrative, the narrative comprised of such terms as myth, ritual, place, mapping, comparison, criticism, and text, none of which exist, at least in the generic sense, in the worlds of our subjects. This "no place" is the "fabrication with no claim beyond that of sheer survival" where we may stand to attempt to comprehend the most confounding and urgent issues that distinguish the world in which we live.

³⁸ This limitation, I think, tends to relieve us of the responsibility to be constrained by our subject. I believe there is a huge difference between creatively interpreting one's subject and an illegitimate construal. We must promote the former and discourage the latter.

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