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Book Review

BRAUN, Willi, and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds). 2008. *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*. London: Equinox. xvii + 506pp. ISBN 978 1 84553 230 7. Hbk. £75.00. Pbk. ISBN 978 1 84553 652 7. £24.99.

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The work of Jonathan Z. Smith has achieved near-canonical status in the academic study of religion. However, an unfortunate consequence of this is that his work tends to succumb to the same fate as many "sacred" texts – many of his acolytes have very little acquaintance with his work. Perhaps this is because, as Tomoko Masuzawa states in this volume, "Smith has never been an easy read" and "one would be hard pressed to name the domain or the extent of his influence on scholarly productions in the field" (pp. 326-27). With this in mind, Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon have set out not to "introduce" *Smith*, but to present a collection of essays that "exemplify *working with* him in whatever domain of specialized knowledge each contributor brings to her or his study and classroom," "introducing" him in the Smithian sense of the word – by underscoring, extending, and even critiquing his "overarching agendum of introducing religion to the academy and introducing the academy to religion" (p. xvi).

Thirty-one chapters take the reader through a cornucopia of religion research, consistently remaining grounded in Smith's method and theoretical work, introducing (and *re-introducing)* both "religion" and Smith, and "illustrat[ing] something about the familiar that makes it fascinating in a whole new way" (McCutcheon, p. 1). Chapters cover a variety of topics from cargo cults to the *Gospel of Judas* with Jeppe Sinding Jensen, Darlene M. Juschka and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan providing particularly insightful chapters critiquing scholarly reticence surrounding "comparison," Eliade's use of the "sacred," and the usefulness of "religion" as a formal category for law respectively. This volume is infused with themes relevant to *Fieldwork in Religion*, not least the invaluable discussions concerning rethinking the familiar, scholarly self-consciousness, the indispensability of theory, and the importance of comparison in our study. However, three further key and interrelated themes shall provide the main focus of my discussion.

First of all is the consistent emphasis upon the word "religion" as a "western" construct, the use of which tends "to reify a Protestant understanding of religion as being essentially synonymous with 'belief' or 'faith'" (Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, p. 463). This view is rooted in Smith's frequent emphasis that "religion" "is not a native category." However, this volume consistently distances itself from the nihilistic conclusions which some would draw from this position: "if scholars have 'invented' religion...that does not mean that they have created something *ex nihilo*; there was already something in the world which justified using such a taxonomic creation" (Jensen, p. 144). This volume does much to remonstrate against the

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increasingly prevalent "rhetoric of despair about 'religion as an object of study' [which] has become nearly hysterical" from some quarters in recent years (Stanley Stowers, p. 434).

Secondly, there was near universal agreement with Smith that religion "is an inextricably human phenomenon." As scholars of religion, we are constantly fighting the cultural inclination to focus upon "the topical 'it' of religious discourses rather than people and societies that constitute, rationalise, defend, contest, and identify themselves in complex ways by means of these discourses in socially, materially, and historically, located contexts" (Braun, p. 483). We can only focus on the human beings who (do not) engage with supernatural beings, and "their creative responses to the ambiguous worlds they inhabit" (McCutcheon, p. 12). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cognitivists involved in this publication understand "religion" to be rooted in behaviour (Paden, p. 408): we can never fully understand it until we "fully welcome that usually uninvited...guest – the human mind" (Luther H. Martin, p. 321).

Finally, most chapters implicitly engage with the question of whether scholars of religion should be "critics" or "caretakers." Some authors, such as Donald Wiebe, feel that "working out the policy/resolution implications of [academic] knowledge is not the task of the student of religion" (p. 477). Others concur with Smith's own words that understanding religious difference "needs to be practised and refined in the service of an urgent civic and academic agendum: that difference be negotiated but never overcome." Most, however, appreciate that "the perception of 'disrespect' and 'snub' is entirely a side issue...that appears to be hyper-felt in the study of religion, though it is an endogenous effect of critical thought itself" (Braun, p. 491). As the editors state in their *Preface*, "introducing" shares many similarities with the concept of "invading," whereby the introduction "of a plant, animal, or organism into new locations where it is not native...may have perturbing effects on" the environment (p. xvi). There is no costless way of knowing...but in our efforts to attain knowledge we should always endeavour, with Smith, to do no harm.

In a phrase fittingly describing the ethos emanating from this volume, Francis Landy states that "Smith prefers the 'general' to the 'universal,' the 'individual' to the 'unique,' precisely because they are provisional, are not all-encompassing, and admit of exceptions" (p. 210). Understandably, given the particularity on display, no individual is likely to be interested in every single chapter, and the volume is let down through occasional lapses in quality. However, through providing a variety of entry-points into Smith's theoretical world, the editors of this inexpensive volume have succeeded in expanding my horizons, and left me eager to explore the Smithian canon, safe in the knowledge that although insuperable, he is eminently worthy of emulation.

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