
‘Has the academic study of religion come of age’ (p. 6)? Sam Gill poses this important question in his exciting and reflective book, *The Proper Study of Religion: Building on Jonathan Z. Smith*. Using Smith and work from throughout his life, Gill shows that the question above cannot be answered with a simple ‘yes’ and turns to his own creative engagement with Smith’s work as an avenue to find possible solutions for the field becoming ‘proper’. To Gill, this means developing a study of religion ‘that is appropriate to and legal in a secular university, as a field of academic study that has a responsibility to offer insight and guidance to the global presence of religions’ (p. 5). At times a heartfelt reflection on Gill’s relationship as first a student and later a friend of Smith’s, and at others an exploration of Smith’s ideas through Gill’s own work, this book emerges as an important example of scholarship meant to move the field forward. Gill recognizes Smith as one of the most influential scholars in the study of religion and provides concrete examples of how thinking with Smith productively served his own work while also illuminating the untapped potential Smith’s work can provide to the academic enterprise of studying religion.

The book begins with Gill arguing that Smith’s greatest but most misunderstood contribution is his work on comparison. Gill locates the root of Smith’s work on comparison in his dissertation on James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), as the dissertation was a history of comparison as a scholarly method and the potential comparison held for the study of religion. While Smith’s most popular understanding of comparison comes from his famous chapter ‘In Comparison a Magic Dwells’ (2000) where he states that comparison is not natural, Gill adopts the language of a ‘necessary double face’ in comparative enterprises to understand and expand Smith’s thoughts on comparison. Chapter 1, ‘The Necessary Double-Face’, identifies two types of comparison that can be linked to Smith’s engagement with Frazer. The first he names a ‘limited objective type of comparison’ that assumes the comparer objectively knows and can reach a conclusion about the state of the objects at the center of the comparison. The second, and more productive according to Gill, type of comparison gets named a ‘subjective heuristic style of comparison’ in which two things are placed next to each other and—based on the comparer’s own interests—marinate, leading to an ongoing line of inquiry rather than an immediate answer. This second type of comparison is what Gill identifies as the future of scholarly comparison in the study of religion. This intervention into the study of religion is the one I find most compelling in the book, and the careful attention Gill gives to the early, widely...
unknown foundation to Smith’s thinking is a key piece to understanding the Smith puzzle a little better.

Moving through other parts of Smith’s work, the remaining chapters provide more concrete examples of what creatively encountering Smith’s work means and the new places it can take us. Chapter 2, ‘No Place to Stand’, centers a discussion between Smith’s work on place and Gill’s work on play. Gill takes Smith’s notion of ‘movement’ as a change of place and thinks about what there is to gain when we think about ‘moving’ instead, a word that implies ongoingness. This ongoingness focuses on the dynamics of movement rather than fixed beginning and ends, a quality that Gill sees as being imperative to the proper study of religion. Chapter 3, ‘The Ordeal of Incongruity’, looks to Gill’s work on dancing and moving as a site to extend Smith. Tackling issues of emotion, affect, and experience, Gill suggests that experience is central to Smith’s work on the scholar and that those ideas are transferable to the experience of the subjects a scholar studies. Chapter 4, ‘Storytracking the Academic Study of Religion’, shows Gill’s scholarly method of storytracking’s applicability to reflecting on role of the scholar, a recurring element in Smith’s work. A way of telling a story as clearly as possible through tracing sources, storytracking is relevant to the scholar given that they are a person creating stories just like the people they study. Chapter 5, ‘Smith’s Golden Bough: Moving toward a Proper Academic Study of Religion’, returns to the points made throughout the book to show what a proper study of religion could look like when Smith is creatively engaged and extended. Serving more as a provocation than a prescription, Gill works towards the goal he sees himself sharing with Smith in the creation of a powerful and important study of religion that does not begin with the assumption of religion.

Meant to be read in order, as the chapters are organized around ideas and concepts that build on each other, each chapter can also easily be taken as a stand-alone essay. The book as a whole is accessible and provides an in-depth but not overwhelming survey of Smith’s work, making it extremely teachable. The lighthearted anecdotes and reflections on their relationship fuse memoir with scholarship, exemplifying Gill’s argument in Chapter 4 that scholarship is really about crafting stories all while presenting provocative extensions of Smith’s well-known contributions to the field. While I may arrive in a different place than Gill does after engaging Smith in the ways he asks us to, Gill’s intentional handling of Smith encourages me—and I hope all readers—to take up Smith with the goal of producing questions that can be discussed, engaged, and argued in ways that they have not been before. It is a worthwhile endeavor to return to the key figures in our field and creatively engage their work to find new ways of thinking, new critical vocabularies, methodologies, and insights within the taken-for-granted of those ‘canonical’ texts and thinkers. I am in full agreement with Gill in that ‘It is time to honor Smith by carrying forward the inspiring theories, methods, and ideas he offered so eloquently and provocatively’ (p. 1).

Jacob Barrett  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
jacbar@unc.edu