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## REVIEW ESSAY

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*On Teaching Religion.* Essays by Jonathan Z. Smith. Edited by Christopher Lehrich. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 164 pages. \$35.00.

To begin, there are statements in this collection that are scriptural in their wisdom. I use the word “scriptural” advisedly, but there it is: there are thoughts in this collection that feel to me to be valuable unto themselves as poetic observations and usable in perpetuity as pieces of advice passed among students and teachers alike. For example, here are five of Jonathan Z. Smith’s rules for the design and practice of a college course:

- (i) Students should gain some sense of mastery. Among other things, this means read less rather than more. In principle, the students should have time to read each assignment twice.
- (ii) Always begin with the question of definition, and return to it.
- (iii) Make arguments explicit. Both those found in the readings and those made in class.
- (iv) Nothing must stand alone. Comparison opens space for criticism.
- (v) A student only knows something well if she can apply it to something else. (3)

What makes these pieces of advice so usable is their specificity (assign fewer pages, externalize your choices) and gentle pragmatism. All of Jonathan Z. Smith’s commandments have this quality of principled attention to detail coupled with a sensitivity to institutional restraints. Another indicative passage reads: “An introductory course is concerned primarily with developing the student’s capacities for reading, writing, and speaking—put another way, for interpreting and arguing.” Smith encourages teachers not to worry about subject mastery as much as they should be teaching practical communication and interpretive skills. “This is what they are paying for,” he continues. “This is what we are paid for. We are

not as college teachers called upon to display, obsessively, those thorny disciplinary problems internal to the rhetoric of professionals . . . Our trade is educational problems, common . . . to all human sciences.” (15) After reflecting about the academic calendar, Smith writes this, one of my favorite passages in the collection: “We do not celebrate often enough the delicious yet terrifying freedom undergraduate liberal arts education affords the faculty by its rigid temporal constraints.” “There is,” he concludes, “nothing that must be taught, there is nothing that cannot be left out. A curriculum . . . becomes an occasion for deliberate, collegial, institutionalized choice.” (13)

In our epoch of neoliberal strategies of self-making and self-promotion, Smith’s commitment to the classroom isn’t just refreshing. It is radical. This collection assembles some well-known comments by Smith about the religious studies classroom but also makes widely available several archival gems, collected by Christopher Lehrich, which reflect Smith’s thinking about the nature of college education, religious studies as a particular educational problem, and the future of the humanities and the liberal arts more generally in the American university. Smith is, in this collection, a leader of our field and a thinker for our field with few peers in topical scope, institutional consciousness, or practical ethics.

I will not say much more about the specifics of this volume, since the very fact of its publication has inspired certain ruminations that connect to and yet for me supersede its bibliographic particulars. I prepared comments on this volume for a panel hosted by the North American Association for the Study of Religion at their 2013 annual meeting in Baltimore. When NAASR president William Arnal asked me to participate on that panel, I did not assume that he asked me to speak only as a teacher of religion. I assumed that he also asked me to join this conversation because I had been a student of Smith’s; and he hoped I would reflect some on that experience. I admit that I found preparing those remarks to be quite difficult: difficult because I find teaching to be a highly fraught terrain; difficult because I find talk about teaching often inadequate to *its* difficulty; and difficult because my relationship to Smith as my teacher is not a simple one. *On Teaching Religion* is filled with clarity about its titular subject, and I am equivocal about the neat certainties in its pages, as well as the authorial celebration its very publication suggests. One assumes we would not read a volume about teaching from someone who is not a good teacher. Smith’s teaching awards as well as his thoughtfulness about pedagogy suggest he must be a good teacher. What more can I, his once-upon-student, have to add to this accolade? I decided simply to write as forthrightly as I can, with the corruptions of ego and memory, and following his imperative to begin with the question of definition, and to return to it.

I graduated from the College of the University of Chicago in 2000 with a dual degree in History and Religion and the Humanities. Religion and the Humanities is the concentration in religious studies designed by Smith, a major whose proposal and defense is reprinted in this edited volume, and a major that has—since my graduation—been eclipsed by a major titled Religious Studies offered under the auspices of the University of Chicago Divinity School. For those who are historians of the study of religion, Smith's departure from the Divinity School, and his founding of this concentration, represents a signal event, one which could signal everything from our field's repeated ecclesiastical anxieties to the interpersonal and institutional dramas inevitably following charismatic academic stars. But I do not want to linger on the intellectual or psychological histories that led to the curriculum available to me as an undergraduate at Chicago, other than to observe that the development of a Religious Studies major at Chicago in the twenty-first century represents another cycle in the ongoing struggle to name the study of religion in relation to the subjects of religion, a struggle to which Smith has been a most tentatively attentive observer.

My own experience at Chicago in the study religion was largely determined by Smith, and rarely a week goes by when I do not reflect on the extraordinary fact that I met the field through his prism. I had never heard of him when I first enrolled as a second-year student in a course titled "Ritual Studies," a course that I had decided to take on the strong recommendation of my college adviser, Nancy Gilpin, wife of the then-dean of the Divinity School, W. Clark Gilpin. Nancy was exuberant about Smith and felt certain that I would find in that course complements to the work I was doing in public policy and the social history of urban poverty. She was right: every text that we read in that course (a course that relied heavily on Ronald Grimes' marvelous 1996 edited collection, *Readings in Ritual Studies*) seemed importantly linked to the social problems I investigated in my other college courses. Increasingly, it seemed to me that religion was more important, more exigent, and more determining than the legislative history, demographic appraisals, and bureaucratic procedure public policy offered. This sense of religion's imperative in human thought and its influence on social action is what led me to designate Religion and the Humanities as my concentration. "Ritual Studies" would be the first of five courses I then took with Smith. As the director of the concentration, he encouraged his students to take courses everywhere—his sense of what could be included in the study of religion was phenomenally capacious. But his courses were the courses that comprised our primary curriculum, and I took every one he offered once I committed to the concentration. I would also work with him for three-quarters

as I researched and wrote a senior essay under his direction (an essay that was co-directed in History by Clark Gilpin).

It is with this experience that I reflect on the nature of his teaching. Such a reflection, if rightly and fairly articulated, would be preceded by several important explanations: about who I was as a student; about the culture of pedagogy at the College; about Smith's own history as a public person; and about the intent of his syllabi and the specifics of our classrooms. If we appraised teaching fairly, we know it would require a 360-degree appraisal, one with a teaching portfolio from him and testimonies from peer colleagues. But most teaching evaluations are not like this. And we understandably gripe through the short-answer results, feeling certain that the increasing importance of student evaluations is one of the worst things to have happened in higher education in the last twenty years. This is not because student responses are unimportant. It is because the best kind of teaching cannot thrive if consumer satisfaction is our only metric. The kind of student evaluations that circulate are unfair because they don't force the student to account for their relation to the assignment, to the classroom, and to the teacher.

If I then say that Jonathan Z. Smith was not a great teacher, I must immediately acknowledge that I must not have been a very good student. I want to say both, at first: he was not as good a teacher as the publication of *On Teaching Religion* suggests he must be; I was not as good a student as I needed to be to confront him with this, with his limits and my own. Professor Smith deserves a student evaluation worthy of his best intentions. All of us do. Not a student evaluation that glosses our inevitable failings and mistakes (teaching is, if nothing else, a regular encounter with failure), but a student evaluation that prompts ongoing dialog about the classroom and its capacities. This is what I intend here.

So, when I suggest he was not a good teacher, what do I mean by this? What I mean is that Smith's courses were mesmerizing and awkward. Mesmerizing because Smith was, himself, intriguing. Unlike many of our quietly passive professors at Chicago, for whom seminars seemed an interruption in their daily devotion to their books, Smith was a famous physical presence on campus, someone whose rituals around classes and office hours (and the eating and smoking proximate to classes and office hours) were conducted in part to signal his availability and presence for pedagogy. "My students know that I eat lunch in Cobb Hall before class, have coffee in Swift Hall after class, and that they are welcome to join me." (6) He performed teaching as a component of his life as if it were central to it. Why, then, were the classes themselves so wan, so dull, so incomplete?

One thing I could observe is how many of the prescriptions he offers in *On Teaching Religion* were never applied in our classes. For example, Smith recommends the following practices:

- Reserve minutes at the end of each class for the students to write and hand in their answers to two questions: “What was the most significant thing you learned today?” and “What question did you have that was not answered?” Devote the first ten minutes of the next class to reflecting on their often surprising answers to the first question and answering their second. (4–5)
- Reserve as much time as possible for self-conscious activity. There should be weekly writing assignments on a set theme that requires argumentation. Each piece of writing must be rewritten at least once regardless of grade. Please note: this requires that every piece of writing be returned to the student with useful comments not later than the next class period. (15)
- At least once a quarter or semester, call in all students’ notebooks and texts. After reading them through, have individual conferences with each student to go over what they’ve written and underlined and what this implies as to how they are reading. (15)
- Have students buy Jack Meiland’s little book *College Thinking: How to Get the Best out of College* and discuss portions of it with them. (15)

Not only did none of these things ever occur, they so glaringly did not occur it is worth saying that the near opposite of such engaged pedagogy transpired. We never submitted weekly written assignments or discussed with him any writing or thinking underway. We would submit final take-home exams, or final papers, and we knew it would be unusual to receive any written feedback about those submissions. It was just understood that this was not his way, and protesting against it, or asking for more, would be uncool relative to the system of quiet presence that he did offer.

Immediately I regret that disclosure. It seems petty to point out the difference between his recorded principles and his actual pedagogy. Every scholar of religion knows that just because something is articulated in scripture does not mean it is applied in life. Perhaps we could just leave it at that and say that the difference between *On Teaching Religion* and its author’s classroom is just another example of the differences between scripture and reality.

To be clear, though, if we were to adjudicate this difference so briskly, we would be practicing a kind of religious studies Smith himself does not practice, on page or in person. A hallmark of Smith’s religious studies is the ferocious close reading of all available philosophical and anthropological source material in an effort to explain human phenomena as crafted

by, and on behalf of, human principle. He was the one, after all, who interpreted Jonestown as Jim Jones said it was: an act of revolutionary suicide. The scholarly Jonathan Z. Smith would have no toleration for a quickly relativistic reading of his own pedagogy. His interpretive effort has been to labor, with great precision, against reduction, sentiment, or bromide. So I want to take a very personal and provisionally quite critical observation about his teaching as perhaps a sign that something is awry in the principled kingdom so well-documented in *On Teaching Religion*. Perhaps the very way Professor Smith struggled as a teacher tells us, his students, and fellow colleagues, something about the extent to which some of us struggle in the wake of his most basic definitional decisions. And about how strange his legacy is for us to try to uphold.

Let me say one truly consistent thing between text and practice: Smith does love definition. It's a practice he recommends relentlessly in these essays, and one which he did indeed compel us, in class, to do, often. "As I persist in teaching my students, within the wordy world of human sciences, the proper way to begin an argument is by an act of definition." (94) Definition isn't just an inaugurating practice, though. As everyone in the study of religion knows, definition is also the definition he has given of us as different from them—of what we, the religionists, are obligated to do in part as indication of our difference from the religious. In one of the more famous passages written by Smith, he explains:

... while there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion—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 existence apart from the academy. (80)

This passage, quoted and repeated by scholars of religion ever since its appearance, pugnaciously declares religion to be what scholars do and suggests further that there is no religion without scholarly labor. There is no data, there is only we, the scholars, deciding what the data for religion will be. And that set of decisions is our definition of religion.

I would not be the first person to observe that there is something daz-zlingly absurd about such a claim. This passage could seem utterly idiotic, argumentatively important, or perfectly axiomatic, depending on your own relationship to religion as a problem for humanistic inquiry. Rather than rehearse the many positions one could take toward Smith's central conceit, I want to turn to his broader corpus and observe

something his many readers have often observed, namely that to read Smith on any of his selected topics is to find oneself sharply jostled from any easy presumptions about religion. He wants to bring his readers and his students from a place of assumption to a place of documentation, to move from one's own imagining about religion to right regimens of religion. This movement is his business; it is the method of our study. Smith's voluminous footnotes attest to this work. There he sources the large number of textual materials he consults to understand his chosen subjects. In those notes, one discerns his effort to find every available source and provide every conceptual interpretation in order to wager a reading that corrects our presumptions, defines our problems, and sharpens our next questions.

This scrupulosity is Smith's greatest legacy to his field, and to his students. One had a sense that to say anything meaningful to Smith required knowing your subject, in and out and upside down. To this day, I feel his gaze upon every sentence I develop to describe a given thing. I feel him in every sentence of this essay, surrounded as I am by his syllabi, my notes, the College course catalogs, and e-mails I wrote to classmates about his courses and our meetings. I can't write a sentence without these piles, without the sense that I've read every available source in order to earn this argument about this thing I am representing. Other students I have met who encountered Smith as a teacher, both graduate and undergraduate, mention this effect with equal amounts of terror and pride: terror at the memory of being called out by him for a missed detail, pride at having learned such accountability to the material.

Lost sometimes amid such documentary intensity is, sometimes, the thing itself. When I teach essays by Smith to undergraduate students—which I do, nearly every semester—they often experience a kind of alienation from his subjects, unable to see what is relatable and human amid all his relating of religion. To be sure, Smith is quite devoted to the problem of relation, especially in his discussions of difference. Smith's observations about the dichotomies of differentiation that religions address, and the rituals that articulate and maintain these dichotomies, are now canonical for the multiples fields of religious studies to whom he directs his ideas. Yet there is an imperceptive center to all this talk of difference and its management, a coldness that often leads readers of Smith to feel he is explaining well the abstract reason behind a ritual, myth, or a community decision, but that he is not capturing anything like their anthropological or psychological reality. Essays by Smith can be like homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright: phenomenal to behold, perfect in their reckoning with the environments they occupy and the materials they deploy, and moving, it seems, in harmonic concert with the land. However, without



exception, every structure built by Wright—from the Arizona home he designed for his son to the Guggenheim Museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan—has profound water intrusion issues. They leak. They work in principle, but in life, despite all their material care and topographical acknowledgement, they don't quite work.

Why? Let us return to Smith's classroom. Of the many things one can say about the Smith classroom, the most accurate would be to say that he was not interactive. He either spoke to us, in a quiet lecturing way, for a long period, offering up his footnotes on a given assertion from the assigned reading; or he and we would sit in long silence, until somebody had the spirit to speak. These speech acts by students would be listened to by Smith and then replied to in a way that left us baffled. We tried to figure out what he had done in his replies: Was he translating what we said into a properly scholarly idiom? Was he simply continuing a line of thought already begun in his head, without reference to our words? No matter what, it is important to underline that his speech acts were, to us, alien. He replied to what we said with his words. A scholar's words. And we rarely, if ever, understood him.

To be clear: he didn't often use big words, nor did he use nouns we didn't recognize. When I say we did not understand him, what I mean is that we did not understand him relative to the words we said. He rarely, if ever, replied to our thinking with thinking that suggested he had heard our struggling claims. Rather, as I now understand it—many years later, reviewing notes and remembrances—he replied to us by correcting our thinking, without telling us he'd done so or, more importantly, explaining to us what needed correction, and why. Without, frankly, involving us at all. I want to be clear: at the time, we often replied to these moments with awe (I remember distinctly a classmate once responding with applause). This was Beethoven hearing a peasant play the piccolo in one moment and offering the Ninth Symphony the next. On a good day, we could hear our piccolo-tune somewhere in what he said. On a bad day, it seemed as if we were utterly irrelevant to the essays he was writing, those brilliant essays, right before our eyes.

What are people to Smith? What are their words, relative to his thoughts? What is their subjectivity in light of his own? Smith is famous for trying to motivate us to name our priorities as those of the human sciences, practiced in laboratories freed of any infection. For many young scholars these were liberating words, allowing their work to feel unhooked from the dramas of religion—religion that they felt had hurt them in childhood, had disgusted them in the present, or merely troubled their historical work in the past, present, and future. Yet I think these estrangements by Smith—pushing us from one imagined sentimentality into a



smarter science—created a contorted relation not merely to our acts of interpretation, but also to our work of institutional and pedagogical occupation.

It is striking to me that we embrace Smith as a figurehead of institutional thought and curricular leadership when he struggled so very much to sustain a collaborative relation with us, with those endeavoring to be in his study of religion. This is a man who gave up work as a dissertation director in the prime of his career (to be sure, many stalwart graduate students would still trudge up the stairwell to find him and engage with him on subjects important to their work). This is someone who for all extents and purposes gave up on one of the largest intellectual gatherings of religious studies scholars—those at Swift Hall, home of the Divinity School—to occupy a tower office removed from their work. Smith spoke often of this difference, this distance, when I visited his office hours, as I did, doggedly, during my undergraduate years. I am embarrassed, now, to report the person I was, then: someone both eager to please almost any authority figure but also someone predisposed to hipster snobbery and class resentment. I would emerge from his office in dusk hours and smirk as I passed the Divinity School. I internally rhapsodized about how wickedly dissenting Smith was. The superiority of the human sciences to the theological arts! The superiority of my teacher to all others! He seemed to be an unlimited font of answers, no matter my questions: about the history of the university, of the United States, of Ethiopia; about the politics of departments, of Chicago, of Australia; and about classical music and postmodern fiction and Talmud and Islamic law and Puritan sermon. All of it and any of it: he was, to me, the most erudite person I had ever met, and he sat properly in the world as exiled from it: from the divinity school that could not bear his enlightenment, and a student body that didn't fill his classes because they, unlike me, could not withstand his pedagogical awkwardness, his endless verbal footnotes, and obscure references. For a late adolescent with a sense of alienation and overblown empowerment, Smith was the perfect idol: he, too, couldn't abide the mess institutions made of the best thinking; he, too, preferred a novel to all other things; and he, too, crafted his personal habits into stylistic propositions. Or so I decided as I transformed his quiet, intense forms of scholarly life into signifiers of his iconicity. The more I dug into religion, the more I dug into him; the more I dug into him, the more certain I became of his *sui generis* brilliance.

Like many memories, it's a hard one to crack with tough thought. I want it to remain as it was in my angst-ridden happiness: wrapped in his cigarette smoke and my sureness about him. But then, I think back and I ask myself: Did I ever speak in those hour-long meetings? Did he ever reply to my questions with his own? Pedagogy is a practice of communication,

and although Smith can, at times, achieve phenomenal lucidity on the page, interpersonally he stumbles. He loves questions from others more than anything else but rarely, if ever, did I hear him have a question *for* others, other than ones bearing upon the facts of a given case.

Reading *On Teaching Religion* inspires greater empathy for this aspect of his person. In those essays, he confesses that the college undergraduate was a personage of no small terror to him. Writing a syllabus is difficult, he explains, because of “what you do not know about your audience.” (2) Smith handles this difficulty with great dispatch, making a familiar move (familiar to those who know how he treats confusing bits of scripture, of religious practice, of stories and rituals). He suggests that in order to teach you must learn more from educational experts. “No one should be permitted to teach an introductory course who is not conversant, among other matters, with the literature on the cognitive development of college-age individuals, with issues of critical reasoning and informal logic, and with techniques of writing instruction.” He concludes, “While there is some art in teaching, it is, above all, a skilled profession.” (16) This is the soothingly scientific Smith, the man who was once a boy enumerating variations of grasses and who now reads every ritual manual available to find the terms of sacrament. The key is that Smith wants you to know that he relies on science rather than emotion. He relies on knowing the mechanics and the chemistry of the given thing, and in so doing relieves you and me who may be disquieted by the mystery and magic of it.

The figure conjured may be operatic in its stock comedy: the socially awkward smart person trying to read books about human beings and their patterns in order to encounter human beings in their idiosyncrasy. Smith tried to understand us, to handle us, while we only made matters worse by being sycophantic to his strange self. We loved to count up his personal habits (the cheese sandwich, every day, for lunch) and his pedagogical tools (pencils always, never pens), as if each new piece of data—data from the religion we made of Smith—could be a trading card we’d finger and discuss. I now think that these repeated practices were designed as his way of managing his charged encounter with us. He walked the same route to the classroom and tempered himself before our unpredictability, so as to keep us in certain bounds, and to keep his own sovereignty protected from infection. Suddenly the phrase *religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study* sounds less than a definitional observation than it seems a neurotic tic. This is the clean place, this is the safe place, this is where thinking goes: the scholar’s study, the thing I do, the thing I think to you.

Where the comedy ends perhaps is in a misrecognition. Attempting to avoid our mess, our illogic, and confusions, Smith created a class and

curriculum based not only on science but also on his charisma. Mastery of religion was not our subject; instead, Smith was.

This is undoubtedly *our* problem. We must bemoan the students who made a minor celebrity of a very real person and criticize them for misunderstanding his syllabi and misunderstanding him. But we students with our idiocies, our laziness, and our personal limits were and are, according to the essays in *On Teaching Religion*, also Smith's business as a professional in the trade of teaching. When assessed for its success before such subjects, Smith's pedagogy can seem like a profound echo chamber: a proposition of science on behalf of the scientist, not on behalf of any other human being. Smith frequently reminds us of that "old Latin tag from Terence" *nothing human is foreign to me*. But one must only reiterate such a banal thing if one needs its prompt to correct the normal regress of perception. We, the world, *are* alien to Smith. He therefore tries to argue us into normalcy, into his interpretation. In so doing, he manages to evade altogether the grimy encounter with difference. And in doing so, perhaps keeps all of us—if we follow him—from teaching to its most certain need.

Time and again I find that my challenge as a teacher is not a problem of my mastery of the material. Nor is it a problem of definition. My problem is the problem of connection: of making what questions I ask connect to those of my students; of making the world of rigorous thinking something intriguing to my students; and of making the very problems of our day important for their days. And in my effort to solve this problem of connection, to link my work meaningfully to their world, I do not find Smith's model altogether helpful. What I mean by that is that I know it doesn't work if I just talk at them; if I just correct them; and if I just prompt them to a simple scrupulosity or scholarly confidence. Perhaps that was a war we in the study of religion needed to fight and win, and perhaps, there are still contexts where we need to fight about the subject of religion as a reasonable one for the secular university. But that problem is secondary to me before the other persuasive challenges of the contemporary classroom, namely the effort to argue on behalf of thinking slowly, reading thoroughly, and risking new readings, together. I find *that* to be my basic labor: to argue on behalf of the humanities to rooms filled with students utterly transfixed by statistical accounts, mechanical explanations, and social psychology. My job is to explain how the humanities offer particular tools for self-realization and social interpretation and to foster a relationship between me and them—and between them and the texts we study—that enfranchises their capacity for inquiry, critique, and innovation. No matter the subject, teaching is a relationship, and a relationship is a decision to be in a relationship, and both parties have to decide to do so or else *there is no relationship*. My work as a teacher is to

create a frame for this relational agreement and to hold myself and them accountable to its highest aspirations of inquiry, research, and articulation. Smith taught me a lot about these aspirations. Together, he and I simply never found a way to pursue them.

This is a time in which many speak about our faculty as endangered species and our universities as crisis zones. And I am certain that our intellectual communities will not survive if we do not think again about our lives as thinkers and our work in their world. The task of traversing that gap seems to me the most imperative work of the humanities today. And I know this because I once had a teacher who failed to connect to us, and we failed to connect to him, even as we were all there, even as every privilege swelled to make our work possible and our questions substantive. It is in that gap between principle and practice that I still labor, in deep deference to him and what he did give me: the urgency of our questions, of this work, of interpretation and recognition, reckoning and understanding. *If not by us, then, by whom? If not now, then, when?*

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