

Chasing One's Tail: Some Reflections on the Methodologies of Mircea Eliade and Jonathan Z Smith

Allan Sun

Introduction

Methodology is like a dog fascinated by the sight of its own tail. Excitement mounts when the tail is in reach: The dog thinks, 'Yes! I've finally caught the bugger!' Biting down, self-satisfaction quickly turns to pain and the tail flicks away, the dog left pondering: 'What happened?' Time passes, mistakes are forgotten and the chase begins anew. This essay will offer a critique of the work of Jonathan Z Smith, a figure held in high esteem by those who wish to revitalise the comparative endeavour in religion in the face of what is broadly labelled the postmodern critique.¹ Despite the fact that Smith's work has been met with near universal praise,² I argue that one should show caution in reading it. While Smith does make worthwhile contributions to the discipline, he deliberately subverts his claims with statements such as 'there is no data for religion'³ and 'map is not territory – but maps are all we possess',⁴ expressing a deep anxiety about the possibility of knowledge. Smith does not so much as counter the postmodern critique but exacerbates it, teaching us that, as students of religion, we have been chasing our tails all along.

¹ See Kimberly C Patton and Benjamin C Ray (eds) *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in a Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, 2000).

² Or more precisely, it is *because* Smith's work is met with near universal praise that the reader should be wary. The only sustained criticism of which I am aware comes from Hugh Urban. This essay is heavily indebted to two of his essays: Hugh B Urban, 'Making a Place to Take a Stand: Jonathan Z Smith and the Politics and Poetics of Comparison', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12:3, 2000, 339-378 and 'Power Still Dwells: The Ethics and Politics of Comparison in *A Magic Still Dwells*', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 16:1, 2004, 24-35.

³ Jonathan Z Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982) xi.

⁴ Jonathan Z Smith, *Map is not Territory* (Chicago, 1978) 309.

On a Panegyric Note

I will proceed by examining the dialogue between Mircea Eliade and Smith, focusing on the problems that Smith inherits and his unusual attempt at overcoming them. I suggest that the fundamental issue Smith addresses in his engagement with Eliade is the question of how theory can be methodologically responsible. This involves the delicate issue of how to approach the elusive concept we call 'religion': what is the nature of our subject matter and how do we bring ourselves into relation with it? Far from straightforward, such questions are a source of much grief for the aspiring student of religion; any proposed answer inevitably raises a further set of problems.

Today, the ideological dimension of knowledge looms large; any knowledge claim raises questions of moral and political significance. Who is to gain and who is excluded? Who is speaking and from where? Eliade is shadowed by a supposed complicity in extreme right-wing politics.⁵ His defenders are accused of careerism and the willful ignorance of evidence.⁶ These questions of moral and political significance are interpreted in this paper as part of the wider problem of historical self-reflexivity. How this problem is dealt with will, in no small part, determine the future shape and direction of the discipline of comparative religion.

Eliade's Conception of the Sacred

The key component in Eliade's work is his conception of the sacred. According to Eliade, we are aware of the existence of the sacred because it reveals itself to us, 'appearing from without', marking out as distinct a time and a place. The time is primordial time, '*in illo tempore*'. The place is the sacred centre, the locus of all creation. It is the duty of *homo religiosus* to repeat and relive the sacred events of *in illo tempore* through myth and ritual and, by doing so, to renew the

⁵ See Adriana Berger, 'Fascism and Religion in Romania', *The Annals of Scholarship* 6:4, 1989, 455-465.

⁶ See Russell T McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York, 1997).

cosmic order. The sacred is the essential, irreducible element of religion and is the rightful province for those who claim to study it.

History, by its very nature – transient, contingent, volatile – is profane. It conceals the sacred in a process of desacralisation, where what was once universal degenerates into the particular. This process gives rise to the outward forms of religion with which we are familiar: the signifiers that (mis)represent the signified. Eliade does give some credit to the role of history when he states that ‘every manifestation of the sacred takes place in some historical situation’⁷ and that the scholar must hold to the ‘historically concrete’.⁸ But while it is possible to trace the historical development of religious forms – we can only know of them as such – the object of the study of religion is ultimately beyond historical reality, according to Eliade. It is the task of phenomenology to complete the task history has begun.

Achieving this transhistorical feat requires a special kind of interpretation: a phenomenological method founded upon a ‘sympathetic imagination’⁹ and a ‘creative hermeneutic’.¹⁰ The sympathetic imagination allows us to relive the myths and ritual of the other like an actor who assumes the role of a character, not as remote external forms, but from within. The results of this experience are then juxtaposed against different phenomena, revealing the universal pattern or archetype that underlies them. Manifestly creative, Eliade’s method is closer to art than to science, a claim which he would not dispute.¹¹ This methodology is not creative *tout*

⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958) 2.

⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans Willard R Trask (New York, 1964) xv.

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York, 1967) 3.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest* (Chicago, 1969) 65.

¹¹ Eliade quotes American physicist Jacob Bronowski: ‘The step by which a new axiom is addressed cannot itself be mechanized. It is a free play of the mind, an invention outside of the logical process. This is the central act of imagination in science, and it is, in all respects, like any similar act in literature’. Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York, 1986) 155.

On a Panegyric Note

court, however. Eliade's discoveries are objective, even while they deal with revelations of a reality lost to our ordinary senses.

Through Eliade, the difficulties posed by our historical existence come to the fore. History dictates what issues rise to salience at a given time, the criteria by which things are judged to be true or beautiful. But as circumstances change, so too do the criteria used to make such judgments. History renders all things transient, obsolete. Eliade was not ignorant of this, as many assume, but on the contrary was all too aware. Science could not provide the eternal truths he was looking for, its mode of acquiring knowledge based on the observation of contingencies. A society ruled by appearances, he held, is like a house built on sand. In order to avert the tragedy of human finitude, Eliade posited the sacred: the transcendent ground of all being, including time itself. He eschewed the methods of science for those of intuition and religious experience, which he understood to emanate directly from this transcendent source, providing unmediated access to the secrets of the cosmos. Critics retort that this is hardly the disinterested pursuit of knowledge that ought characterise the academic enterprise; it is 'covert theology', a 'religion after religion'.¹² Claiming the existence of a totality no-one could actually observe, Eliade's method is dogmatic in its propositions and unfalsifiable in its conclusions: the bugbears of bad theory.

A second criticism commonly leveled against Eliade is that his method has serious political and moral implications. There are two interrelated aspects of this criticism. Firstly, it is claimed that a substantial definition of religion is provided *ipso facto*, precluding the possibility of alternative definitions and hence the recognition of difference. This criticism is well-known as postmodernism's invective against grand narrative. Secondly, the particularities of Eliade's definition of religion also preclude difference. The sacred is the essence of religion; it is a singular homogeneous substance from which all being springs and to which humanity should return.

¹² See Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henri Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, 1999).

Eliade's comparisons are structurally weighted toward the similar. Similarity unites and difference divides; therefore, difference is degenerate and should be overcome. The other, no longer characterised by its difference, turns out to be really just like us; humanity is brought together under the fictive unity of *homo religiosus*. This humanistic impulse too often endorses violence against the truly different, against what does not fit the preconceived worldview. This criticism identifies a latent ideological function present in Eliade's method. Exactly what this ideology involves however is not the concern of this essay. Suffice it to say, it is not difficult to see how the controversy over Eliade's political affiliations can be read as the flip side of his metaphysical speculation and denial of difference.¹³

Smith's Conception of Religion

For Smith, religion is one of the ways in which humans construct the worlds of meaning in which they live; it provides the source of the conviction that their existence matters. In *Map is not Territory*, Smith invokes the metaphor of a map to illustrate this idea. Just as maps are used to make sense of and to negotiate some territory, religion too aims at making sense of and negotiating the world of lived experience. It involves an ongoing process of application where the expectations of tradition are constantly weighed against the demands of life, where the correspondence between maps and territories is assessed. When either side becomes asymmetrical with its other, when the demands of life are such that tradition cannot cope, either tradition must adapt or life must suffer. Religion is essentially pragmatic, concerned with the here-and-now rather than the distant past.

Smith extends these ideas to encompass the study of religion. It is a way in which worlds of meaning are constructed, which again provide the source of the conviction that the scholar's existence

¹³ See Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi Strauss and Malinowski* (London, 1987) Chapters 3 and 4.

On a Panegyric Note

matters.¹⁴ The myth and ritual that constitute our data are not intrinsically ‘religious’, supernatural or extraordinary; they are simply the maps of others. Our choosing to label data as ‘religious’ is but an instance of our own scholarly mapping strategies. The study of religion is a creative enterprise where the scholar negotiates between his or her conceptual frameworks and the data at hand, to see whether they adequately make sense of, or ‘fit’, the data. Exactly what counts as adequate or ‘fitting’ is, however, an open question, since something can only be considered so with respect to an intended purpose, a wider context. This context is provided by history.

Smith is dismissive of those who argue that there exists a stable ground from which to interpret the world. The adequacy of a theory cannot be measured in terms of objectivity, of the accuracy of a representation to things ‘out there’ in the world.¹⁵ History precludes this option; there is no fixed normative, political or ethical position in relation to data:

The philosopher has the possibility of exclaiming with Archimedes: ‘Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world’. There is, for such a thinker, at least the possibility of a real beginning ... a stand point from which he has clear vision. The historian or the historian of religions 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.¹⁶

To avoid the ‘infinite regress or silence’ suggested by historicism, Smith argues that we must take the plunge at some ‘arbitrary point’.

¹⁴ ‘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 ... through the use of myths, rituals and experiences of transformation’. Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 290-291.

¹⁵ ‘[I]t ceased to be axiomatic that the scholar’s ... task was to represent accurately what was ‘out there’. Most crucially, and across the board, the notion of a determinate and unitary truth about the physical or social world, approachable if not ultimately reachable, came to be seen by a growing number of scholars as a chime’. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988) 523-524.

¹⁶ Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 129.

This arbitrary point is the scholar's position relative to the data, arrived at through a creative 'exercise in the strategy of choice',¹⁷ with regard to the wider intellectual tasks at hand.¹⁸ In this manner, theory is founded on the subject's self-determining freedom and on the uses to which it is put, rather than any necessary relation to the world as it actually is: 'there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study'.¹⁹ Smith goes on to assert that these constructed frameworks, religious or scholarly, never actually fit the content. There exists a fundamental disjuncture between thought and the world it aims to represent. Smith expresses this view in his pithy statement: 'map is not territory – but maps are all we possess'.²⁰ The disjuncture between map and territory, between thought and reality, Smith labels 'incongruity'. It is pivotal for his methodology as a whole.

Incongruity is the unavoidable fact of our contingent (that is, historical) existence. It is the irreconcilable gap between a constructed reality and reality as it really is: in the case of religion, between tradition and the exigencies of life; in the study of religion, between our conceptual frameworks and the data at hand. Smith uses the notion of incongruity to illustrate the absurdity of the human condition: despite all our attempts at understanding the world, we will always fall short. The flux of history causes human understanding to be constantly on the back foot. It renders concepts, languages and entire worlds obsolete, forcing us to construct newer ones better suited to the emerging circumstances. Eliade perceived this as tragic and chaotic. The continual redundancy of the old and manufacturing of the new progressively alienates humanity from their paradisaical past. The sacred was Eliade's attempt at stemming the tide of history, bringing order and finality to our lives. While Smith endorses the capacity of religion to organise experience, he asserts, against Eliade, that there can be no finality. Within the context of history, finality means oppression. Incongruity is a blessing in disguise, guarding

¹⁷ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 56.

¹⁸ 'It is creativity in terms of how one's choices are combined, compared, and thought about – and to what end'. *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, xi.

²⁰ Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 309.

On a Panegyric Note

against the excesses of dogmatic certainty and providing humans the space in which they can freely carve the contours of their own existence. Religion and the study of religion have an ironic quality: the success of religion lies in its failure, in the oscillation between the ideal and the real, theory and reality.²¹ An examination of how Smith conceives myth will make this notion of incongruity clearer.

Myth is a 'strategy for dealing with the situation' that fails.²² It is a kind of 'self-conscious category mistake', which plays upon the incongruity between traditional modes of thought and the prevailing historical circumstances. For example, Smith interprets the myth of Hainuwele collected from the Wemale tribe of Ceram.²³ Recorded in 1927, the myth tells of how the goddess Hainuwele or 'Coconut Girl' excretes a number of valuable and distinctly foreign articles: Chinese porcelain dishes, metal knives, gold earrings and brass gongs. The people became so jealous of her wealth that they kill and dismember her, burying her body parts in the ground. From these body parts grew a new type of plant that would become the tribe's primary source of food. Where Eliade would interpret this myth as the archetypal cosmogonic sacrifice and dismemberment of the primordial deity, Smith sees it in more practical terms, as an attempt to reconcile the incongruity of the colonial encounter between the indigenous peoples and the Europeans.

The situation faced by the natives was the erosion of the traditional value systems, based on principles of exchange and reciprocity, when confronted by the material wealth of the Europeans. The myth does not resolve the incongruity of the situation: 'the experiment was a failure. The white man was not brought into conformity with native

²¹ Smith draws heavily on Mary Douglas' definition of the joke: 'a play upon form, which brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which is in some way hidden in the first... the joke affords opportunity for realizing that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary'. Mary Douglas, 'The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception', *Man* 3:3, 1968, 365.

²² Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 299.

²³ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, Chapter 6.

categories, he still fails to recognize a moral claim of reciprocity'.²⁴ But like the joke, riddle or metaphor, myth provides an occasion for thought.

Smith presents a historically self-reflexive interpretation of the study of religion, arguing that the human is *homo faber*,²⁵ a post-Kantian builder of worlds, and not *homo religiosus*. Smith's method is fundamentally anthropocentric, the concept of 'religion' being understood from within our relationship to it, rather than from outside. Eliade began with fully-formed objects external to the individual, ready to be internalised and categorised. These objects are hidden, but nonetheless there to be grasped. Smith begins with the subject in an actively self-determining relation to the world and to itself. Meaning and significance do not inhere in things themselves, but are qualities we project onto them in an act of choice. There are no ultimate standards of judgement, apart from those we endorse. It is we who decide what is sacred, what counts as religion, how to interpret data and the conclusions we want to reach. Making these decisions is the interested subject, addressing concerns intelligible only under certain historical conditions. As these conditions change, so too must the concepts that are used to understand them. In this sense, there exists a fundamental disjuncture between thought and what it aims to represent. Rather than being a cause for concern, however, this disjuncture provides the space required for difference

²⁴ Smith's conclusion in full: 'The Ceramese myth of Hainuwele ... does not solve the dilemma, overcome the incongruity or resolve the tension. Rather it provides the native with an occasion for thought. It is a testing of the adequacy and applicability of native categories to new situations and data. As such, it is preeminently a rational and rationalizing enterprise, an instance of experimental method. The experiment was a failure. The white man was not brought into conformity with native categories, he still fails to recognize a moral claim of reciprocity. But this is not how we judge the success of a science. We judge harshly those who have abandoned the novel and the incongruous to a realm outside of the confines of understanding and we value those who (even though failing) stubbornly make the attempt at achieving intelligibility, who have chose the long, hard road of understanding'. Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 307-308.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 144.

On a Panegyric Note

and the dynamism of thought. Religion's power lies in the oscillation between the ideal and the real.

Homo Faber vs Homo Religiosus

There is something comforting in Eliade's forthrightness. He conjures feelings of nostalgia for a time when one could say exactly what one meant. This is no accident. Eliade proceeds from the assumption that humans have unmediated access to objective reality, the representations of which are not influenced by the historical location of the subject. In a modern context, such claims to unmediated access are usually grounded in a scientific method; in its place Eliade posits his own transcendent foundation and a complementary hermeneutic. The underlying assumption remains the same, however: understanding consists in mastering the material circumstances²⁶ under which one is entitled to use a concept. Theory must accurately reflect reality. The *correct application* of concepts is constitutive of truth and from the truth comes the good. In Eliade's case, the truth is the sacred; knowledge of it overcomes the dualism from which the study of religion emerges, but from which science cannot escape. Truth applies in all places and at all times. This is one way of construing the logic behind Eliade's definition of religion. The sacred (content) identifies certain phenomena as 'religious' (concept). Religion is substantial and *sui generis*.

The benefit of this approach is conceptual clarity; we know exactly what concept applies to which content. The drawback of emphasising the correct application of concepts is the unanticipated consequences of their use. It is important to make this distinction because Smith engages with Eliade only by addressing the consequences of concept use, ignoring the antecedent conditions that determine how concepts are applied in the first place. It needs to be determined how Smith does this and how it affects his method. Smith claims, firstly, that the substantial and monistic nature of Eliade's truth denies difference and, secondly, that a hermeneutic based on a transcendent grounding

²⁶ Material in its widest sense: thing-like; substantial.

is unobservable and hence indisputable. Smith's response to each of these issues will be considered in detail.

Eliade offers a substantial definition of religion: this is what religion *is*. Smith offers a more pragmatic assessment: this is what religion *does*. Smith forfeits the idea of correct application, focusing on how material circumstances permit the use of the concept 'religion'. He shifts the focus to the practical consequences of the use of the concept 'religion', its capacity to provide order and meaning. He reverses the order of explanation: first comes the good and whatever is good is true. What is gained over Eliade is that, by focusing on the consequences of concept use, the scholar can tailor 'religion' to explain a variety of different phenomena without having to reduce them to a single substance. Religion becomes a dynamic, open-ended concept capable of accounting for history and difference. This approach is not without its difficulties, however.

Exactly what content is the concept of religion supposed to refer to? For Eliade, it was the sacred. Smith's conception of religion is conspicuously vague. It is difficult to see what makes 'religion' special and how it may be differentiated from other 'non-religious' modes of human activity. Smith's point is that religion is not *sui generis*. There is nothing that distinguishes it from other modes of human activity, apart from those aspects which we project onto it in the service of our own interests. The concept 'religion' is drained of its content. This is the significance of Smith's claim that 'there is no data for religion'. The scholar is free to manipulate the concept to serve whatever purpose he or she sees fit. However, this cannot be entirely true; there are still restrictions on what one can and cannot do with this concept.

Despite Smith's attempt to make religion as inclusive as possible by establishing a purely formal definition of religion, the substantive commitment nevertheless remains. Smith is making the claim that this *is* religion: the scholar *must* focus on historical context and not search for a deeper, hidden meaning beneath the text. Wendy Doniger raises the point: 'To insist on historical context is therefore to deny the power of the mythic or imaginal consciousness; it is yet another

On a Panegyric Note

way to deny difference, to remain unmoved and in control'.²⁷ Smith anticipates this criticism. To maintain the recognition of difference, Smith initiates the principle of erasure:²⁸ the simultaneous assertion and denial of content recast as the notion of incongruity.

Where Eliade establishes a transcendent grounding from which to interpret the world, Smith asserts that no such grounding exists and so shifts the locus of inquiry so that religion is understood from within the subject's relation to it, rather than from outside. Method becomes immanent and observable, but now must reconcile the influence of history on the interpretation of data. Smith's response is that this influence is irreconcilable. Theory will be forever incongruous with reality. This is reflected in his conception of how religion, myth and ritual operate. Myth is a strategy for dealing with a situation, a strategy which ultimately fails. Ritual is the acting out of how things ideally should be, in stark contrast to the way things actually are. The power of religion lies precisely in its failure, in the oscillation between the ideal and the real. And because the scholar also has no place to stand, the study of religion must also operate on the premise of incongruity.

Smith asserts the dynamism of history and the importance of difference, but at the same time makes several universal value judgments himself: the claim that humans are essentially *homo faber* is one of them. Here Smith is engaging in the same sort of 'deep' speculation that he explicitly shuns. To avoid the apparent contradiction, Smith falls back onto his notion of incongruity: Smith's own particular map, his own way of making sense of the world, does not represent reality as it actually is. Eliade confused his theory with reality, leading to the charges of essentialism, homogeneity and so on. Smith's claim that humans are *homo faber* is an improvement over Eliade only if Smith posits some ultimate objectivity that is beyond our reach, where the concept of *homo faber*

²⁷ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York, 1998) 52.

²⁸ The relation of Smith's methodology to his cultural upbringing is noteworthy, just as Eliade's method is often related to his fascination with Eastern religions.

does not apply. In other words, with Smith's assertion comes its simultaneous denial. When the critic is in need of something substantial, Smith can point to *homo faber*. When the critic is skeptical, Smith can point to incongruity. He argues from one end to the other – and then back again. Just as the success of religion is founded on incongruity, the success of theory too lies in incongruity, in the oscillation between theory and reality. This is undeniably a clever strategy, but its effectiveness in addressing the concerns raised by Eliade is negligible.

Smith is deliberately evasive about his own normative commitment.²⁹ He writes: 'I am an essayist, which makes me more elusive and indirect than a writer of monographs. I tend to do my work in relation to others. I tend not to speak my mind'.³⁰ One cannot help but be suspicious: what purpose does this withholding of information serve? Smith does not give us a reason, but Sam Gill provides one for us. He argues that Smith's work is best understood as a form of 'play'.³¹ Gill reasons:

To take a stance, in this complex multi-cultural world, without recognizing its absurdity is either religious, narrow-minded, or naïve. 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*, is the perspective of play: seriously taking a stance while acknowledging its absurdity.³²

²⁹ McCutcheon comments: 'Those familiar with Smith's work will no doubt agree that he can, at times, be a bit cagey – not in the sense of being evasive, but in my reading, in a profoundly strategic sense'. Russell T McCutcheon, 'Relating Smith', *The Journal of Religion* 86:2, 2006, 292f. It is still evasive, even if it is strategically so. Arguably, strategic evasion is worse than inadvertent evasion.

³⁰ See the discussion of Jonathan Z Smith's 'The Domestication of Sacrifice' in Robert G Hammerton-Kelly (ed) *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, Rene Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford, 1988) 204.

³¹ '[C]omparison represents the academic field of play... the terms of comparison and the comparative analysis are... the equipment or toys or moves by which the academic plays'. Sam Gill, 'No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z Smith as *Homo Ludens*, The Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66:2, 1998, 206.

³² Gill, 'No Place to Stand', 306, emphasis added. In the footnote to the word 'interesting', Gill writes: 'While I want to say "productive" or "promising", I recognise these terms depend upon the old values of moving towards truth and

On a Panegyric Note

Although not explicitly Smith's position, Gill reaches the only conclusion that makes sense of the contradictions in Smith's work, while maintaining its intelligibility. Smith, however, declines to tie off the various strands of his work in any conclusive way, knowing full well that if he did, it would be self-defeating. This point seems lost in Gill's enthusiasm, not realising that the punchline has already come and gone. There are a number of problems in Gill's statement that only serve to highlight the obliquity and ineffectiveness of Smith's method. The infinite regress or silence Gill attributes to postmodernists is itself a stance. Claiming that we live in a 'complex multicultural world' is itself a stance. The perspective of play, 'seriously taking a stance, while acknowledging its absurdity', is itself a stance. The simple fact is: it is impossible to avoid taking a stance no matter how cleverly you make out that you haven't. To do so is not 'narrow-minded or naïve'. To believe that acknowledging the absurdity of the situation somehow addresses the problem is.³³

The ideological component in Smith's work has not diminished but simply changed. Hugh Urban comments: '... the real question is not whether there are ties between the comparative study of religions and the evils of colonialism or fascism; rather, the more troubling question is whether it has ties to the economic and political interests of the US in our times'.³⁴ Smith's argument is a case in point. Smith envisages the human being as a free, self-reliant, creative and resourceful individual, actively constructing the world in which they live and constantly reinventing their own identities. Objective reality has been forfeited and choice is introduced to take its place as the locus of meaning. This is an appealing alternative, because the recognition of choice is conducive to the recognition of difference, giving the study of religion a kinder and more open appearance.³⁵ But this is far from the case. Smith's method does not respect

reality'. No longer are things judged good or bad, beautiful or ugly, true or false, useful or useless, but simply 'interesting', a terms which erases such distinctions.

³³ I do not deny that one can be playful while being serious, but note that the humanities have a harder time pulling it off than in the domain of the arts and literature.

³⁴ Urban, 'Power Still Dwells', 28.

³⁵ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, 1992) 69.

difference but rather neutralises it. Emptied of any determinate meaning or content, religion is reduced to the superficial level of the interesting and quaint. Smith at once confirms our alienation from the world, while allowing us to participate through the endless distractions of choice. To satisfy this demand, the study of religion assumes an acquisitive character, where the worlds of others are raided for raw materials, manufactured into harmless novelties and consumed on the academic market. 'There is no other', Smith writes, 'it is all what we see in Europe everyday'.³⁶ He may as well have added, 'on the television, in the shopping mall and in our books'. The irony of Eliade's broadside against 'bourgeois morality' was that Eliade himself is shown up to be thoroughly bourgeois. Smith not only embraces it, but attributes it to humanity as a whole.

Conclusion

If the capacity for choice and judgment is fundamental to human life, it cannot simply be reduced to the playing out of a purely subjective will, without reference to an external world. The movement from necessity to choice demands that we also inquire into the reasons motivating our decisions. What makes this particular option better than any other? A religion that advocates peace is preferable to one that advocates violence. Smith's method, however, gives little indication as to how we are to decide between these, beyond the call of individual taste. The concepts 'play', 'absurdity' and 'incongruity' are incapable of dealing with issues of ethical significance; yet these are the issues that religion often concerns itself with, and what Smith himself seems to address in his call for theory to recognise difference. If life is absurd, why should we bother to recognise difference? Any serious answer to this question cannot avoid making a value-laden, ideological statements. Denial is not an option. We must accept this fact so that we can better deal with its consequences.

This is ironic: the limitations of Smith's method stem from the one-sided emphasis on the consequences of concept use over the material

³⁶ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xiii.

On a Panegyric Note

circumstances of their deployment.³⁷ This approach is flawed because concepts do not simply ‘work’ in a vacuum; they are not groundless or arbitrary, as Smith assumes. For a concept to work, it must in some sense cohere with the norms and values preceding it. These norms and values are not eternal. They do not issue from a transcendent source or belong to the psychic unity of humankind. Rather they exist in history, intersubjectively, between participants in a communal and ongoing dialogue. This is the ground from which interpretations are made. For this reason the scholar must make explicit the normative commitments that underlie his or her judgments. Only when these commitments are openly shared can they be endorsed or rejected, subject to criticism, reflection and change. Bruce Lincoln, a scholar who meets Eliade’s challenge more effectively than does Smith, writes: ‘There is a significant political dimension to all religious discourse, and ... it is not only possible but important to render this visible so that it may be subjected to critical analysis’.³⁸ Making explicit what is implicit guards against the reckless imposition of our worldview upon others. The relationship between ourselves and others must be one of reciprocity.

Instead of addressing the problem of our historical being and the interested nature of thought directly, Smith hedges, hides and oscillates, making assertions while denying them at the same time. This strategy makes for fascinating reading, but tends to obscure more than it clarifies. Smith’s methodology highlights the inevitability of ideological commitment; it shows that the failure to disclose risks the confusion of ideas, the tendency to mistake something for what it is not. This is especially dangerous when those ideas are supposed to represent the lives of others and when the warm fuzz of self-satisfaction obscures the critical imperative. Smith urges the scholar to be ‘relentlessly self-conscious’.³⁹

³⁷ The argument in this paper is indebted to Robert Brandom’s semantic inferentialism. See Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, 2000).

³⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago, 1991) 244.

³⁹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi.