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Reflections on the "Thinking with Jonathan Z. Smith" Conference at NTNU

Podcast with **Aaron W. Hughes** (11 November 2019).

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 Andie Alexander: (**AA**): *Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. I'm [Andie Alexander](), a doctoral student at Emory University. And joining me today is [Dr Aaron Hughes]() of the University of Rochester. We are here in Trondheim, Norway, following the "Thinking with [Jonathan Z. Smith]()" [Conference]() that is hosted at the Norwegian Institute for Science and Technology. And we're here to talk about the legacy of Smith and his work, his contribution, and ways in which we can move forward in the field. So, Aaron – Hi! Thanks for joining me.*

Aaron Hughes (**AH**): Hi, Andie. How are you doing?

AA: *Great. Are you enjoying Norway?*

AH: I am. It's very beautiful.

AA: *It's nice.*

AH: The midnight sun reminds me of my childhood in Edmonton, Alberta.

AA: *There you go. As long as I've been here it's only been daylight! So, I don't know if the sun sets. But it's been nice.*

AH: I think it sets at like one, and then gets up at three.

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AA: *(Laughs) It's very nice. Well, let's talk about Smith. Let's talk about what we've discussed, and see what questions we have.*

AH: Sounds great. Let's do it. I think we should probably begin everything by saying that Smith has probably been the most important theoretician over the past fifty years, half century. I think he's so important . . . so I'll talk about the past before I talk about what I think. So I think that probably, he more than anyone, was responsible for smashing the Eliadian phenomenological paradigm. The problem is, even though that paradigm should be long dead and buried, it's still one that our students gravitate towards and still one that a number of our colleagues gravitate towards. I think, it's what I tried to say a couple of times, we're in one of these rarefied environments of people who are more critical, who just think we're all the same and we preach to the converted. Whereas, when we walk the halls of the AAR and look at some of the papers that are given there, they fall back a lot on that old phenomenological model. So I think that's Smith's main importance. So Smith – and I think we all fall in this legacy – refused to see religion as special, *sui generis*, or as unique in the ontological sense. It might be unique to us, but ontologically it's not unique. And if it's not unique, you can't compare it to anything else. And I think that's the beauty of him, is that he was able to show the incongruous relationship between the quote-unquote "religious" and the quote-unquote "mundane". So I think that's where . . . . I mean, and the other thing, I think, that came up a number of times at the conference was the ludic or the playful dimension of Smith. But I mean the flipside of that is that he was so knowledgeable and so comfortable. Whereas when we get undergraduates who are not comfortable and they don't have nearly the depth of education that he did . . . so there's a problem of translation. I think the other thing that's great about Smith is his broad comparative . . . his broad vision. And I think that's something that a lot of us don't share, because again that goes against what we're taught in graduate school. So it's funny, I think, when I talk to a number of people about this, a lot of the people here who work with Smith . . . . I think I really only began to appreciate Smith after graduate school. Because then you're afforded the slowness of reading him, and appreciating him.

AA: *I can see that. It's sort-of different, given that I've had to read him as an undergrad, because. . . It's a different sort of introduction . . .*

AH: Right. In Alabama. Yes, definitely!

AA: *And so, in the same sense, it's something that I think is important for people to at least have in their repertoire. But something that I find is often not taught in grad school, or is never much, and it's always highly contested.*

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AH: Yes. And I think I said in my lecture that I never encountered Smith until graduate school. We just read people like Eliade and [Weber](#), and maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe the person that taught the course thought, "Well you'll get Smith later, so let's . . . ." That was good for me, because I read first all the things that Smith would later be critical of. By the time I came to Smith it was like, "Yes, I can see that."

AA*: I think, too, the distinction that you're making between seeing religion as "unique for us", and not ontologically unique, is something that is lost, partly in that religions chapter that he wrote (5:00). I suspect, as I read that, he was being provocative – but he probably meant it. But not in the way that I suspect a lot of people want to contend with. And it's easier to dismiss. Because as you said, he was pushing back against the whole phenomenological paradigm, I suppose. And while, especially given the group here, we are relatively on the same page and think that this should be obvious that this should be something that everyone is doing . . . and that's something you mention in your keynote: how is this not something that's just common knowledge across the academy?*

AH: I think a lot people still believe in the sacred, or still believe . . . . I think this is where the problem is. We live in a very chaotic world where "religions" quote-unquote don't seem to like one another particularly. I think this really comes to the fore after 9/11. So a lot of people in Religious Studies think that Religious Studies can be that which facilitates conversation between religions. That's always . . . I joke to my students: "I didn't spend ten years in graduate school to be an interfaith dialogue facilitator." As important as that work is, though, really. So oftentimes I'll try to get Jews and Muslims to talk together but not under the auspices of the academic classroom. I think, as I've said before, religions get along better when they talk to one another as opposed to when they shout at one another. But I do think a lot of people in the Religious Studies academy think that that's the goal of Religious Studies: to show the similarities between religions. I disagree, and I think Smith would disagree. But I think that . . . I always worry that Smith was . . . . Smith was on point. Smith was edgy. Smith was critical. Smith really encourages us to do that. But the two things that I worry about, as I said in the keynote, are those people that will just write him off as another dead white guy – which as I said is absolutely stupid, given the fact that he wasn't even white, he was Jewish. But that's another matter. And the second thing that I think we'll see is how the field will "inocculise" Smith. So that he'll just become like a name or a trope. And people can invoke him but they'll do it in a way that takes off the edge. And I think we see that. I've seen it a lot. So everyone can say, "According to Smith blah, blah, blah . . ." But they'll never quite follow through in what Smith wanted us to do.

AA: *I think you're right. And I think in some ways what he was working against then, with his work and pushing back against the Eliadian model, we have a different version of it that's sort-of present in the academy now. It's maybe not as overt. But I think it's there. So, to me, I suspect there's still some push that has to happen. There's still conversations to be had within the discipline. And how it works. And I think part of my concern in those conversations is the dismissal of Smith. It's reductive – all of those critiques that get applied to his work. And what I find is that there's very little engagement with it – if one has even read it.*

AH: Well, I think just as Smith goes against our traditional ways of reading and thinking about religion, I think the modern academy goes against Smith. So on the one hand, our students come in woefully ignorant about what religion is. So we can't engage the type of work that Smith wants until much later. You can't have redescription without description. So I think we spend a lot of time, at least the classes we teach at the freshman and sophomore level, trying to describe to students. But hopefully if they stay for later classes we can begin to redescribe. The other thing is, I think, with the contemporary academy we're always encouraged to do community engagement. And so job interviews will ask people, "So how will you interact with the community? What will you do with them?" And I think, in interacting with the community, we have certain expectations that go against what Smith (**10:00**). . . I don't think Smith ever interacted with the local Jewish community. I don't think the local communities are really amenable to the type of conversation that Smith had. So I think we have to fight back. And I think that's what some of us would do. But the key, in moving forward, is how to keep the edge of a Smithian analysis. How to apply it so it just doesn't become a bromide – which is what I think a lot of people would like it to become.

AA: *Developing what Smith was doing, trying to continue to push it forward – especially given the requirements both of the job market, of service for the school, the department, because that's shifted over the past 20 years alone. And community engagement is something very big, and there's a huge focus on doing that sort of work. And I think that it can be very productive. But as a discipline we're still figuring out how to do that successfully, I think, in ways that we can both learn, but also interpret, and translate, and in service of larger concerns and issues both in the community, the discipline, the nation . . .*

AH: Yes. Well I think what you'll never or rarely see a job in just theory and method in the study of religion. I think in the past twenty years I've maybe seen three or four of those. So, one always has to be trained in a tradition. And I'm not sure if Smith was trained in a tradition. I mean his thesis was on .

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. . his dissertation was on [The Golden Bough](). So Smith was generalist at a time when Religious Studies was particularist. So the question I think becomes: how can you translate a Smithian-type analysis into the particular fields? And that's difficult, as we saw with some of the papers here that tried to engage Smith from the level of area studies. There had to be a lot of remedial work that they had to do for us, who aren't in that tradition, in order to get to a small Smithian point. So I think, as we move forward, how to translate Smith into area studies will not be easy. But maybe that's the point. That was one of the points that came out several times in the conference, was the playful or ludic dimension of Smith. Maybe that's the method: to show the playfulness or the ludic dimension of what we work on, or how – quote-unquote – "sacred kingship" in Tibet is no more special than any other type of power hierarchy. So maybe that's it, it's the playful dimension. Maybe that's his method. Did he have a method, other than showing that the religious is not qualitatively different than non-religious?

AA: *Yeah. I mean, I think . . .*

AH: Reflexivity, maybe?

AA: *Yes self-reflexivity is certainly something that is required and this came up in many of our conversations. But maybe coupled with that playfulness.*

AH: Yes. I think you're right. I think that Smith's message on the one hand is very simple. We need to be self-conscious, self-reflexive scholars who don't treat religion as somehow special different or special from mundane things. And I think that's where the playfulness comes through. So the question becomes: how do you translate that into particular religions, which in area studies tend to be a lot more serious and not engaged in play? And how do you translate that into a pedagogical idiom or an idiom working with the communities, which are not accustomed to think about religion in a playful way? Because, "this is what the Bible says you're supposed to do". Or, "this is what the Qur'an says". So I think the classroom is easier to translate that than the community. But it still poses its set of problems. From our conversation yesterday, we said that where Smith tried to translate his more theoretical ideas was in the *[Dictionary]()*. I'm not sure how successful the *Dictionary* was. I mean, no-one engaged the dictionary here. We rarely talk about that. We talk about the essays in his main publications. But we never talk about the *Dictionary* (**15:00**). I haven't looked at the *Dictionary* in ages. So maybe I should go back again and look at it. So it's hard. But maybe the main translation of that is to get students to be playful with religion. That's how I try to do it, so they can joke about it. Obviously . . . I think it's easy in the community, too. As we move forward, and I think I said that in the lecture, I mean, we have to absorb Smith's critique. We have to absorb his wit. And we have to absorb his edge. But create new

edges and new wits as a way to move forward. Because if not, we'll just make him into a name or slogan that doesn't have any venom. And I think that maybe the way to go with that is to bring him into the study of particular religions, which isn't easy. The main thing I really like about Smith is that he encourages us to use our imaginations.

AA *And I agree. For Smith he does encourage that. He encourages odd comparisons that might not make sense. And tracing historical etymologies and to have a better conception of how we talk about religion. . .*

AH. . . in human activity.

AA: . . . *in human activity, yes.*

AH: It's hard, because. . . . I agree, and I think that's the way it should be. But ultimately if you're in an area, like in Islamic Studies, my work has to be adjudicated by people in Islamic Studies. It might not . . . The chances are it might not come out of Religious Studies. So you always have to move back and forth between trying to make theoretical contributions to the field of Religious Studies, but with the realisation that people in Religious Studies might not read it, because it's in Islamic Studies, or Jewish Studies, or Buddhist Studies, or whatever. At the same time, to write in such a way that those people that would naturally read it – people in those area studies – would be able to understand the argument. So that's always the trick. I think I've been able to do it well. But I don't think it's easy. And I think, ideally, I've tried to pave a path for young scholars in Islamic studies, to try to do that. Whether that's successful or not, I don't know. But that . . . I think that's the main thing as we move forward... that will be one of the issues of how to translate Smith. We talked about that. We talked about [Daniel Barbu](#) and [Nick Meylan](#) in Geneva in Switzerland have tried to [translate Smith into French](#). I'm not sure to what effect. Part of the project is trying to translate Smith into Italian. And again, I don't know how you . . . . It came up several times: how you translate Smith for an undergraduate American audience is one thing, but how you translate it for an Italian audience, or a French audience, or a Polish audience, is another thing. And I don't think that's easy. But I think Smith should be translated into other languages. Probably maybe not a word-for-word translation, but a more conceptual type of translation. How do we take the playful aspect in English and translate it into Italian? You can't do it.

AA: *You can't.*

AH: You have to be playful in Italian in order to . . . . So it becomes a very difficult process. But all

translation is difficult. You can think, do you want a literal translation, or do you want a conceptual translation? And I think it's the conceptual translation – both at the literal level in other languages and into other fields within Religious Studies – that will be the difficulty moving forward. But I think it can happen. I think it will happen. Most of us here are committed to making that happen.

AA: *Yes, I think so. As was mentioned, it doesn't happen overnight, those changes. But I think that, to me at least, is why having more productive work happening in the classroom early on, and not following the method of just: give information, undo it later. . .*

AH: I like to . . . See, because I have to work with Islamic Studies and most people don't know anything about Islam, I really have to begin by making sure they know the narratives. And ideally know the texts in the languages. Because then, I think, you can learn the theoretical stuff (**20:00**). I know probably people would disagree with me here, but I'm old fashioned that way. But I think you need the description, I think you need the details and the facts, but later you can say that no facts are facts, they're simply ideologies going under the guise of whatever. But I think students need that. And then they can play. Because you can't play unless you know the rules of the game.

AA: *That's true. You have to know the rules. And I think that's key. But where I think I'm going to push on that, is that most people are not going to play. They're not going to be here, right? And so, if we're talking to an undergraduate class of a hundred people, and this is the humanities credit that they get, what then? Because they're not going to remember the narratives of Islam. They're not going to remember different facts about any world religions.*

AH: Yeah. That's tough.

AA: *And so, is the key, then, that they have all of that data that makes them feel more confident in saying, "Well, I know what true Islam is", versus being able to weigh those claims of authority and authenticity against one another?*

AH: I think you're right. We always speak out of our own context. And I'm lucky, we don't have humanities requirements in my university. People are in the class because they want to be in the class. And I think if I'm playful enough in the class then they'll come into the second and third level classes. So yes. So I've never dealt with that. But if I did have to teach a larger class - I teach 18-20 students all of whom want to be there, and who do the reading – so if I had to teach these big . . . . I can't even imagine doing it. I don't know what I'd do. I really don't. I mean I guess you're right. How do you

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transmit the information, but in the same way let them know that the information is wafer thin?

AA: *It's contingent.*

AH: Yes. So that is . . . That's a tough question. And I don't have to think about that too much, which is a cop out! But I know if I taught at a large state university, for sure I'd have to think about that.

AA: *And I think that is part of it. The ways in which any discipline is approached varies so drastically across universities.*

AH: That's what Smith said. That's a great point. Because Smith taught at the type of place that I teach at. So very bright undergraduates – some of the brightest in the country – who probably had some idea of what the religions were. And then he would kind-of work to undermine that. So like where I teach, I teach an Introduction to Jewish History class. And most of the students are Jewish. They've come out of, often, Jewish day school in the New York City, Boston area. They know their stuff. They know the data. But I get them in the classroom because they're very bright, and they think "Well, you know what, maybe my parents . . . maybe it all doesn't quite make sense." So at the introductory level I can probably do what people at a large state university can only do at the third or fourth year. And I wonder if Smith probably had something similar to that. Because he must have taught. . . .So I think that every institution is different. And there's large state universities, there are the colleges and they're like the elite, private university, [Research 1](#) universities that have these different constituencies. And maybe that would have been a good workshop, translating this myth into the undergraduate classroom? But heck, I don't think we can translate him . . . . Most people can't even translate him into their own areas of research. How they translate him into the classroom is not easy. Because I think, to go back to where we began, Smith asks us to do that which is the opposite of what the modern academy encourages us to do. Which is to read quickly read fast, to not have an imagination, and to not take pedagogy seriously (**25:00**). And I think that all of Smith's work shows that, no – you have to do those things.

AA: *Yes. It absolutely does to me. And I think that's something that is lost, given the requirements both of grad students and tenure track faculty instructors, of course. There are so many demands on production that there's not enough time to really investigate something that might not be in your area, or work through how to apply something. And this was a question that I think came up, in terms of applying Smith. Should we be trying to strive for a literal, intentional understanding of Smith as the author, or should we take what we can – whether he's taught in the classroom explicitly or referenced*

– and adapt it. And try to apply those ideas in ways that might not be obvious. But, well, if we're going to talk about "the other", let's consider issues of immigration or . . .

AH: Yes.

AA: *And that way you can bring it in – even though his e.g.s are not anything that I would use, personally, in a class – or even overlap with the area that I work in – and try to take some sort of nugget or something from his approach, in terms of shaping our own approach. Because, as you mentioned, that's a key thing for Smith is how he is approaching his own research.*

AH: Yes. I think Smith might say, "Forget about me. I'm gone. But take some of the tools that I've tried to play with and work with them. You don't even have to mention my name. You don't have to say "J.Z Smith said this . . ." Just take the self-reflexivity, take the playful element, take the comparison . . . and, again, when smith says of comparison: "You can't compare X to Y without having a third term, Z", like, on the one hand that's so obvious, but on the other hand it's so deep. But I think Smith would say "Well, just move forward." I'd like to think that's what he would say. "Forget about me. Just keep the creativity, keep the self-reflexivity, realise that the terms you use probably have baggage in them and don't simply replicate them." That's what I'm more interested in. I think for me, one of my main goals is to try and take some of the complicated Smithian and other analysis that we have in Religious Studies – at least in the critical wing of Religious Studies – and translate them into area studies. Which is not easy when you have to do it in a particular way. But I think I've done it with a certain amount of success. So I think, like that's... how you take ninth century Arabic texts and ask certain questions of them – not flatten them by asking certain questions, but how you appreciate the texts on their own terms and at the same time ask questions of them that come out of that which us theory-and-method-people do.

AA: *Yes. And I think that is the key. Because when we are at a conference like this, there's a luxury of working with people who are all sort-of working toward the same goal and are concerned for those issues. But then translating that into our own fields and to others in the academy . . . .*

AH: And it's difficult, as we saw with some of the more technical papers on the second day. I mean some of the . . . I mean there's a lot of descriptive work where, say, someone working on South Asia or East Asia, in order to bring the rest of us up to speed there has to be a lot of descriptive and informative work, and only then can they get to the questions. And I think, as the papers were so short, that sometimes it was difficult to get to those questions because of all the background work. But that's

good, though. I think that's good. Because I don't think Smith would say, "Oh yeah, we should all just give up working in areas or text and just ask these questions." I think he would say that some of us should do that work.

AA: *Yes. I mean we have to engage that. And I think what's good, too, with the technical papers that we heard, it is hearing from other disciplines and not talking only to your discipline* (**30:00**)*. That's exactly what highlights – at least in my way of thinking – Smith's goal in terms of playing with ideas and asking different questions. Because when you are listening to a paper on East Asia, and I do American religion, then what we have in common is not our area. So if we're going to talk to each other productively, as I would hope we would, we have to have a way of doing that.*

AH: Yes. We have to have common set of questions. I think that's what Smith really . . . I think that would be his definition of the field, where people who are working with different texts, and different traditions, and different data sets, can learn from one another by asking similar sets of questions. And to me, that's Religious Studies at its best. But again, for those in area studies like myself, it's a trade-off being able to do that and at the same time to be able to speak to just those people that work with Arabic texts or other types of Islamic texts. Which isn't easy. But it can be done.

AA: *It can be. And I think the only way to impact area studies in a way that could push it to a more Smithian, potentially Smithian model is to do that, and to bring that work there. And we can't also just talk to ourselves.*

AH: Yes, exactly.

AA: *And it's easy to do – but again, that goes against the whole point. We have to engage across areas and disciplines within Religious Studies.*

AH: Yes. And also realise that sometimes area studies have a lot to teach us, too.

AA: *Yes.*

AH: I think that's important.

AA: *I think so.*

AH: And I really think that'll be Smith's legacy. I think that that's . . . . On the one hand, he doesn't ask

too much of us, but on the other hand he asks everything: to rethink ourselves, rethink our own relationship to that which we study – and if it's found wanting, to transform.

AA: *Yes. I think you are absolutely right about that. Jonathan Smith has given us quite a task, as we move forward in the field of Religious Studies. Again, Aaron, I want to thank you for sitting down, and taking the time to talk with me about the conversations we've been having over the past couple of days at the "Thinking with Jonathan Z. Smith" Conference here in Trondheim, Norway. Again, a special thanks to the Norwegian University of Science and Technology for hosting us here, and hosting this exceptional conference. I know I'm certainly looking forward to the publication of the papers from this conference which will be due out sometime next year, through the NAASR working paper series. So be sure to keep a look out. And, again, thank you for being here today. I've really enjoyed talking with you.*