

*Comparing Ancient Religions.
A Discussion of J. Z. Smith's 'Drudgery Divine'*

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J. Z. Smith tells us two stories in his book: the story of a great chain of scholarly misunderstandings, and the story of describing similarities between ancient Christianity and the religions of Late Antiquity. Both stories are carefully studied, reported with numerous valuable suggestions and ably presented.

Reading this book made me feel like being under the treatment of an intellectual health service. Smith has chosen the study of Mystery religions as an example of the obstinate impact that tacit assumptions make on comparative studies and the distortions produced by them. Like a good doctor Smith diagnoses the disease. This disease has its roots in a long history of theological bias deriving from Protestant apologetics against Catholics. In these controversies ancient Mystery religions played the same role that sacraments perform in religions such as Catholicism. Well-known Protestants of different professions agreed that the early Church lost its genuine character by adapting to the Mystery religions. Because of this background the issue of similarities between pagan religions and ancient Christianity became a battlefield of hidden theological wars.

Smith provides evidence of an obvious failure of the so-called hermeneutical circle. In understanding others we must refer to our own experience and knowledge. But at the same time we have to rule out misunderstandings deriving from our own assumptions. Only by revising them can a good understanding be attained. In this context we may recall the names of F. Schleiermacher and H.-G. Gadamer who view misunderstanding and not understanding as the normal condition in communication. The case, Smith presents, is an example of this unfortunate rule. He shows how a theological assumption tacitly governs comparisons even in the work of scholars of high repute. This disease has seldom been identified as clearly as he has done.

If the size of a footnote indicates a central concern of an author the note on Kirsopp Lake and Arthur Darby Nock deserves our special attention. Kirsopp Lake had argued that already with Paul, "Christianity became sacramental—or a Mystery religion." By saying this he offended the Protestant consensus concerning early Christian ritual especially its difference from the Mystery cults. Nock rejected Lake's interpretation and pointed instead to the Jewish background of early Christianity. According to

Nock, the religious history of ancient Judaism was sufficient to account for the Mystery elements in Paul. Smith subjects this thesis to rigorous scrutiny and discovers once more the old wine in new bottles: for Nock Judaism functioned as a pure island from which early Christianity had departed. The cargo it took on board had been purified even if it was once derived from pagan religions. Jewish descent confers honour, pagan descent must be legitimized.

By applying this treatment to well-known scholars Smith directs our attention to a paradox: The more our historical knowledge about the involvement of early Christianity in the history of ancient religions has increased the more a peculiar practice of comparing intervened and neutralized the threat. In a passage even more crucial as the note on Lake and Nock, Smith proposes a cure for this disease. He demands a thorough revision of the comparative method. According to Smith comparisons should be regarded as a means for describing degrees of similarity and dissimilarity between two independent objects, with respect to a question, a theory, a model. In the study of Early Christianity this question was tacitly the uniqueness of Christianity. Similarities with pagan religions were described either as independent parallels (not threatening the distinctness of early Christianity), or as borrowings that testify to the adaptation of Christian religions to paganism. The foundation text for this distinction he found with Adolf Deissmann. In his famous "Licht vom Osten," Deissmann raised the question whether obvious parallels were borrowings or independent expressions of similar religious experiences. Each observation of similarity, Deissmann demanded, had to be assessed with respect to this alternative: analogy or genealogy?²¹ In his discussion of this assertion Smith proposes to remove the category 'genealogy' from the study of religions completely. What remains are analogies, nothing more.

As an example I would like to focus upon his interpretation of the so-called Mediterranean 'dying and rising gods.' Recent research has made it likely that an interpretation of these gods as representing death and rebirth is untenable for the simple reason that the majority of them died without returning. They were at best rescued from complete annihilation. So they are certainly not the ancestors of Jesus Christ. Smith refers to a study by G. S. Gasparro describing in what sense Attis is granted survival: His body does not decay, his hair continues to grow, a finger remains in motion (Smith o.c. p. 127). This strange picture doesn't deter Smith from comparisons with Christianity. Similar varieties of the concept of survival are known also in the early Church. A study by Burton Mack (*A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*. Philadelphia 1988)