
For the generation of religion-scholars now reaching retirement, Jonathan Z. Smith, University of Chicago, has represented the principal source of critical theory, of positioning the academic study of religion in the setting of the academy and in the context of public intellectual life. Indeed, for four decades he has been best characterized as academic religion’s principal public intellectual. Here in this newest work we have a collection, compendious and wide-ranging, of his most current, and intellectually experienced, essays, two decades of thought. The work is comprised by a Preface, seventeen essays written from 1983 through 2002, that is, after his *Imagining Religion*, and a list of the author’s publications from the first academic one in 1966 to 2003.

But while he has framed a system and structure of thought about the academic study of religion and its results, he has made his contribution in bits and pieces, essays, and not in a coherent statement, not in a book. His books are principally collections of essays, for Smith defines himself as primarily “a writer of essays, which are often reworked versions of lectures.” He goes on, “I understand the role of one who identifies himself as a generalist and comparativist to be that of interacting with the agenda and data of others. This has meant that much of my work is situational, designed for particular audiences, often discussing their assigned topics or questions.” But if we read his essays all together, a clear program and system emerge—and here and there are articulated, not merely instantiated. A model essay by Smith will begin with a surprising and apparently irrelevant case, focus on a proposition or problem implicit in the case, and with astonishing erudition and breadth of thought set forth a fruitful hypothesis emerging from the facts adduced in evidence.

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and argument. What is implicit always emerges, what is apparently irrelevant always registers in the end. And, as my précis of the seventeen essays in this newest collection is meant to demonstrate, a coherent set of propositions does emerge through the dense and difficult discussion of unfamiliar data. The range of erudition is staggering, the depth of insight into the meaning of the data astonishing and compelling.

His influence reaches circles that scarcely intersect otherwise, specialists in one religious tradition or another, for example, will find illustrations of his generalizations in the specific religious traditions on which they concentrate, respectively. His theses about the character of religion, in the tradition of Mircea Eliade, accordingly illuminate specific religious traditions. The road leads from religion viewed as a coherent phenomenon of society and culture to diverse religions. In Smith’s hands the academic study of religion is a generalizing science.

That is why I have found him so useful for the formation of programs in the academic study of the formation of Judaism. Through the decades I have read his writings for stimulation and guidance. My message has been, I have answers, I seek questions. And what I need to frame are the questions that my sources, those of formative Judaism, turn out to answer: focus and purpose for the information supplied by the classical writings. Treating Judaism as a religious system, not as a source of history or a focus of ethnic culture, I found Smith a principal source of stimulation, a source of productive questions, and, in these pages, I still do. Since Judaism surfaces in his essays only sporadically and uncommonly, his capacity to illuminate through perspicacious generalizations the traditions of a particular religion truly astonishes.