

**Remarks towards Some Comments
on
Smith, Canons and Vagrant Aporias in Religious Studies**

It has lately been argued that J Z Smith's interrogation of both canon and 'canon,' his radical questioning of the "this" or "that" of the historian of religion, is an act of delimiting limitation, and thus serves commendably to introduce religion to our students.¹ For me, These colleagues liberate the mind all the while holding it in rigorous relentless check. It is a liberation. The liberation consists in seeing canon as a kind of religion because, as some colleagues wisely insists, religion, as a kind of culture, is a kind of canon, itself. But this notion of achieved liberation is equivocal. No less than for the religious actor who self-constitutes by being constituted through a canon, still less than for the religious agent, the scholar of religion imagines a question, indeed an inquiry, which is in the end equivocal. But, this presses the scholar of religion to question, what is, in effect, the veritable warp and woof of being, the structure of a world. The scholar of religion will order this inchoate verisimilitude of the real as an answer, yet an answer still generating thick streams of additional questions. But why this question, as others rightly remind us, or indeed any question? Why this world, this cosmos, this universe? This structure, or some vagrant deconstructed aporia? It is in truth arbitrary. And, that finally is saying it is a choice – the veritable finest flavor of introduction to our discipline.

Choosing is clearly key for these readers of Smith. Inevitably, it requires them to plumb the depths of Smith's values – values we post-modern students of religion cherish because not reified as mere *idées fixées*, much less *objets trouvés*: those moods of playfulness, that hide skepticism in rigor; the self-scrutinizing anti-colonial and anti-ethnocentric gaze that struggles to realize a *souppçon* of the perspectival, yet truly holistic, thing-ness of commodified reality; the moral compass that constantly directs us to the ways racism or sexism essentialize even the most chaste anti-essentialism. Not pushed to prefer the metaphysical "walnut" of their metaphorical whimsy, over that self-same ontological "pecan" some colleagues pose in opposition, we confront consciousness afresh. Why? Unlike the "walnut," the self-conscious study of self-consciousness (the study of studying religion) consists not only in the recognition that we limit. It consists in the elaboration of what limits us: how have limitations been inscribed, what are the hegemonic values embedded, not only in this or that limitation, but in the very practice of limitation, arbitrary as it may indeed prove to be. Again, unlike the walnut, the arbitrariness of choice here does require explanation. And like the prohibition of pork for the reasons of God or health, this explanation conceals its own grounds. But unlike in the case of pork, here these scholars deftly intrude themselves, and in so doing, we discover that the explanation covers over the patent arbitrariness of the law, in the study of self-consciousness. The "meta-phor" of the arbitrary is the concealment: it is "for" that world – "meta" – behind and beneath positivism's naturalistic ground. The arbitrary, like the pork, can never come from God. For while it is not easy (for the nonscientist) to see why the difference between their "pecan" and "walnut" is better captured polythetically than monothetically, we know that it conceals the most cherished value of choice. Stand fast! Let us resist the mono-theistic, mono-theoretical values that kill life in the laboratory of the classroom.

This is to recapture a frequent allusions to that evasive laboratory of the choosing mind – one however where the laboratory metaphor calls out to be redescribed as the *meta-phor* – the subtle reshaping, while reinventing of the "laboratory," a classroom opened by grasping its laboratory nature – that is nonetheless not a deadly essence. Yet, a "*labor-atory*" can never be less than a "workshop" of "*oratory*" and in being so, a veritable *fons et origo* of the poetic, elegiac

and, at times, “Bacchanalian” – as Smith’s gloss of Jonestown’s perplexities suggest from afar as a fading distant echo. In his insistence on not being beholden to canons, some colleagues join forces with Smith to re-describe “canon” (and canon, to be sure) itself as the very thing we must inevitably do, only of course later to undo, in thinking and understanding anything or, simply nothing at all. We must lay down limits on the arbitrary even though it be arbitrary, which is the same as saying such limits are ours, yet still not ours to own, to possess. In their own way, these colleagues suggests, as Smith has suggested before, how we must exegete within limitless limits and the still (ever?) incompletely understood understanding of the logics of religion. We need to accept the inevitable coming confrontation with *Le Néant* of the poets and philosophers: we cannot but strive to limit the arbitrary – yet in an act of insane futility, as mortals must learn to their never-ending dismay.

In engaging such a scenario with the beginning student, we show how we choose the data in the service of a theory we deploy if only to understand it. Our theory makes plain what the data does not say about itself, which is that it is, like theory, a series of choices, a series of limitations, a series of “canons,” yes, a series of sayings about itself in silence. I choose because I want to ask about “this” or “that.” What then is the explanation for the “this” or “that” of the theoretical question? Does this not beg the question of whether we need theory at all, or peeling back the skins of the onion, a theory of theories, a data of data, a reason or an explanation for the lack of reasons and explanations other than “I chose” – that is the arbitrary of the arbitrary? *A Peer Gynt* moment? In that crucible of creative life, we can hope that our “*labor-atory*” classrooms generate massive flows of oratory, beyond our comprehending, and beyond religious studies.

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Notes

1. Kczonzka Annuskewska, “_adny Robota,” *Szczepanowiczkego Gazetta* 900/66 (2010): 34-63.