Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith is the much-anticipated volume dedicated to the scholarship of Jonathan Z. Smith. Editors Russell T. McCutcheon and Willi Braun have assembled an eclectic range of essays from over thirty scholars who pay homage to Smith's scholarship not simply by discussing his legacy, but by continuing his project of “the work of studying religion” (xvi).

Given, then, that the volume's purpose is not to talk about Smith's scholarship but to work in the spirit of it, the contributors heed his challenges to reexamine and to reevaluate the data of religion, as well as to insist that the study of religion be grounded in theoretical and methodological reflections. In general, the essays have two main forms: they either (1) refine or extend Smith's technical discussions of theory or (2) apply Smith's specific challenges to a particular topic. For instance, many essays take seriously his charge to redescribe the data and the categories of religion, and similarly, many of the contributors grapple with or problematize concepts taken for granted in the academy (e.g., the essays by James B. Apple, Catherine Bell, and Karen L. King, among others). Moreover, a number of essays revisit in interesting new ways topics of traditional scholarship (e.g., the essays by William E. Arnal, Francis Landy, and Jack N. Lightstone, among others). Introducing Religion also contains a number of more abstract theoretical discussions (e.g., the essays by Donald Wiebe, Stanley Stowers, P. Pratap Kumar, among others) alongside the more narrowly focused ones, as well as essays on the cutting edge of many contemporary theoretical and methodological debates in the study of religion, such as the topic of religion and cognitive science (e.g., the essays by E. Thomas Lawson and Luther H. Martin).

Many readers will knowingly smile at how the structures of some of the essays overtly mimic Smith's essays by juxtaposing at the outset the unfamiliar with the familiar, and then ultimately tying them together with an underlying, often surprising, commonality. Readers will also appreciate the essay by Burton Mack, who offers his personal struggle to come to terms with
Smith's scholarship, and similarly that of Tomoko Masuzawa, who argues that Smith “has never been an easy read” (327) and so puts forward a fresh exegesis of one of his essays. In short, this volume embraces the difficulties that come with implementing methodological and theoretical challenges. In doing so, it allows for creative freedom and experimentation that might be discouraged in other venues.

Although most readers will be familiar with the better-known aspects of Smith's scholarship, one of the advantages of Introducing Religion is that the reader need not have an extensive familiarity with Smith's many and multifarious works. His major contributions to the study of religion become clear after reading only a handful of Introduction Religion's essays. Conclusions about Smith's scholarship include, but are not limited to, the following. First, Smith's analyses of the academic study of religion participated in the growing trend towards establishing the field as a rigorous, scientific discipline. Second, his approach to religion initiated an important methodological development that stressed the importance of comparison. Third, his emphasis that religion is a human phenomenon opened up scholarship to new methods and theoretical frameworks, as evidenced by the essays in this volume.

One is hard-pressed to find major criticisms of Introducing Religion. On one hand, the essays cover such a diverse range of material that not all of them will be of immediate interest to all readers, but on the other hand, there is certainly something for everyone. What ties these contributions together — i.e., Smith's scholarship — allows even the more general reader to navigate these essays.

The particularities of this eclectic volume come out only during a close reading. Not only will admirers of Jonathan Z. Smith appreciate this volume, but also those who are interested in where the study of religion is headed in the future. If this volume is any indication, the field is headed in the direction of the redescription of categories and concepts, the implementation of experimental projects, and the reevaluation of the traditional data of religion. Jonathan Z. Smith helped initiate many of these projects, and thus Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith is a fitting testament to his wide-ranging impact on the study of religion.
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