

Ann Taves: Jonathan Z Smith, the Robert O Anderson Distinguished Service Professor of the Humanities at the University of Chicago grew up in Manhattan, where as a teenager he aspired to be an agrostologist, that is a botanist who specializes in breeding grasses.

Jon Z: When grass was just what cows ate.

Ann Taves: When grass was just what cows ate. A plan he did not abandon until he belatedly turned to the study of religion and philosophy as an undergraduate at Haverford College. His early fascination with botanical classification, the Marxism of Manhattan's west side, and Ernst Cassirer's work in linguistics, all left their mark on a scholar who more than any other has shaped the study of religion for our generation.

Aaron, Ablard, ablution, abortion, abstinence, Abrahamic religions, accretions, acculturation, Adam and Eve, adoptionism.

Carole: He was a dynamo. Yeah, my name is Carole Myscofski. I teach at Illinois Wesleyan University. I'm the McFee Professor of Religion here. And I am also the director of Women's and Gender studies. And he was like a tidal wave in the classroom. He was so full of energy and information. His A edition is astonishing when I look back at that. So he was sort of an overwhelming presence. But one also got the sense, even though I was a naïve undergraduate, that he was creating a new field in a way.

So it was like ... I would say like catching a willow of the wisp, but he was much more solid than that.

Sam Gill: I met him actually fifty years ago almost exactly right now. My name is Sam Gill. I teach at the University of Colorado at Boulder. So I was at the University of Chicago starting in the fall of 1967. And I think it was probably Frank Reynolds or somebody that said, "Hey you should go do some work with Jonathan Smith." And I knew he had something of a growing reputation at the time, but I didn't really know who he was. So I made an appointment. I found his office and went to see him.

And when I did that, we had a very brief first encounter. And I just very naively said, "I'm supposed to be here to do something with you." And he said, "Well why would I wanna work with somebody like you?" And I was like shocked. So I muttered around a little bit. And he said, "Well, write me a paper and leave it by the end of the week and I'll see." And so, I did that. And when I dropped the paper off, made an appointment to see him the following week, and went in to see him then. And it was a remarkable meeting. He sat on one side of the desk, I sat on the other. And I could see that he, on the very first page of my paper, had just covered it with red ink. It was just amazing. And he started in, from word by word, sentence by sentence, literally ripping the thing to pieces.

And I remember particularly one word he stopped on, and the word was infamous. I think that paper was on Moody or somebody early 20th century. And he said, "This is a word you should never ever use." And I just frankly didn't even know what the word meant. I thought it meant very famous instead of negatively famous. So anyway, we went on and on and on and I just sort of decided that I was done. I probably just need to leave. And that was the end of my career in religion. And after a half hour or so of this, he said, "You know, this isn't really that bad of a paper." And he handed it to me and said, "Re-write it and get it back to me next week." Well, I walked out of his office. And as I was walking across campus, I suddenly realized that though I had, I don't know, at least one graduate degree, maybe two before that, this is actually my very very first learning experience. This is the first time someone took me so seriously that they gave me their full attention and criticism.

Gene Gallagher: One of the things about him as an advisor is when you had his attention, you had all of his attention. My name is Gene Gallagher. I used to teach at Connecticut College in New London Connecticut, and I retired from there in 2015. And now I teach part time at the College of Charleston. I don't think I've ever had since anything read as carefully as he read the successive drafts of my dissertation. And those were the days when you could get a job without being finished, so I went back to Chicago at one point. And I remember meeting with him after he introduced a speaker and then cut out through the side door so that we could go over the final parts of my dissertation to get it ready for acceptance during that summer. So he was a very very careful reader and a very insightful reader. I think that's maybe one of his major strengths as a teacher as well.

Keely McMurray: Fatalism, fate, fear, feet washing, fertility rights, festal cycle, fire, fire ritual.

Chris Lehrich: I could remember reading the odd article by Jonathan about teaching religion. Yeah, my name is Chris Lehrich. And I'm a scholar of religion interested in magic in early modern history and comparison and things, and I was Jonathan Smith's student, graduate student, at University of Chicago. There's a famous article in JAR, for example. And I thought this is very odd. And I started looking for these articles. And I discovered that there were a lot of them. And most of them had appeared in relatively obscure journals for a number of reasons.

And so, most people hadn't seen them, people in religious studies. And they knew of Jonathan as the guy that wrote, you know, *Imagining Religion* and so on. But they didn't really know anything about this whole other dimension of his work. And as I read more and more, then I thought it was interesting and stimulating and challenging. And some of it was much wilder than I had expected. Until I read the pieces, it had never occurred to me that he was opposed fundamentally to the notion of a college major. With hindsight, it's obvious. But at the time, I didn't realize this. And he's really leveling very strong challenges. And I thought this is good stuff.

So I suggested to him ... I wrote him a letter and I suggested to him that I edit the book. And he was ill off and on for, I don't know, 35 years or something. So I said, "Look, there's a lot of labor that goes into editing something and I'll be happy to do it." And he said that he was interested in doing it, but that he had already proposed that book to University of Chicago press and they had said that they absolutely had no interest in the book. And so, he didn't think that it was very sellable. So I said, "Well that's fine. I'll try selling it to a different press," which was another piece of labor that he didn't feel like doing.

So I sort of took it up. Oxford was very excited about it. And from there, it was just the usual editing work, but it was just a matter of stumbling on this trove of material that nobody seemed to know about that struck me as intimately important and relevant and, like much of his work, that he really seemed to have penetrated the consciousness of the discipline.

Gene Gallagher: I remember him saying to a group of us at one point that on occasion he would ask his wife, Elaine, to get his oldest suit ready for class because he was going to take a dive off the stage that day. And it made me think of how his individual class sessions were extraordinarily carefully composed. He wasn't just winging it. He knew exactly what he wanted to accomplish from one minute to the next.

Carole: So I was trying to think of the things that he used to do in class. He had several small habits, perhaps this will be helpful. He would sit on the back of his chair and rock backwards. And we would all wait thinking that he was about to crash over. He did it repeatedly in class. This was in college. He never fell over, but he kept our attention wrapped on his situation. When a student asked him a question, he would have a very elaborate ritual of opening his cigarette box, taking a cigarette out, tapping it against the box. So it would take about five minutes for him to get around to answering the question. But he also used to ...

He smoked in class and he brought his own ash tray, a little tiny pocket ash tray with a little cover. And this was another thing that students were fascinated by. We talked about it later. He would let the ash burn for a very long time until we were convinced that it must fall over any minute now, but it would never do it. And then he'd casually pull out his pocket ash tray and flick it in, put away his pocket ash tray, and continue. He smoked even when students asked him why he did it. He would sort of with a wave just dismiss the question. He also dismissed the question of what religion he was and whether he was religious. I remember in class, he said, "That's of no interest to me."

Gene Gallagher: He makes a big deal, as you know, in his writing about teaching that nothing is necessary, and that everything is to be chosen as an example of something else. And that's kind of liberating. That means if you're teaching Intro to Religion, it can take multiple forms that are legitimate and defensible.

Keely McMurray: Incense, ineffable, inerrancy, infallibility, infanticide, infibulation, infinite, initiation rituals, inquisition, inspiration, intention, intercession, intensification rights, invisibility.

Ron Cameron.: He's also, of course, a hell of a guy, as we all know, and just a pleasure to be with and listen to and enjoy his company and his ability to think on his feet, which is astonishingly impressive, his sense of humor, his telling observations, his deep humanity. My name is Ron Cameron. I'm the Professor of Religion and Chair of the Department of Religion at Wesleyan University in Middletown Connecticut.

I'll say two little stories about Mircea Eliade. Eliade, of course as you know, was his longtime colleague whom he loved dearly though disagreed with enormously as is well known. But Jonathan told me some time ago ... I believe it's in say the mid sixties, maybe '66/'67, around then, he and Elaine his wife were driving cross country to go to Santa Barbara where he was to teach for a year or two. So they're driving from presumably Chicago, cross country, and they're going through Wyoming, the state I was born in. So they stop to get some gas and use the facilities. Jonathan would have another cigarette. And so there he is at a gas station in Wyoming on the interstate.

And he said ... a guy coming out of the men's room. And the guy was still zipping up his fly, but under his arm, as he was walking out and zipping up his fly, under his arm was a copy of Eliade's Sacred and the Profane. And Jonathan told me, "He's everywhere. Eliade's everywhere." And then one more Eliade question. This was when Jonathan was lecturing in Jerusalem in [inaudible 00:14:57] the late nineties ... the late eighties, around '88/'89, something like that. And so he said that they were given of course a special tour of the Western Wall with heavy security, and of course Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem. And they're walking, of course, up with security 'cause it's a dangerous place.

And of course Jonathan with a cane is walking more slowly with Elaine his wife. So they're bringing up the rear. But they're up on top of the wall where otherwise you wouldn't be. And so they're walking and all of a sudden he hears a kid say, "Halt!" So Jonathan stops. And then, the kid says, "Who are you?" And Jonathan says, "We're scholars." And he says, "What are you here for?" Jonathan says, "A conference." The kid asks, "What's it about?" Smith says, "Sacred space." And then the kid says, and I quote, "Oh! Eliade!" He's everywhere. He's everywhere. He's in toilets in the men's room. He's the top of the Wailing Wall the West End Wall. He's everywhere.

Carole: The next Eliade, that's a very strange thing to say. But he was someone who was as knowledgeable, as widely read, and as innovative ... more innovative in some ways. Jonathan viewed him as a wonderful colleague, a kind man, sort of an elder in the field, even while he was of course very carefully critiquing and pulling apart Eliade's methods and his evidence, you know, in a very serious way. But the personal relationships were very positive.

Sam Gill: Ah yes. Well Eliade was my teacher as well. I had classes from both of them. And while ... as it's widely known, Smith was very critical of Eliade. And that wasn't necessarily reciprocated because Eliade wasn't a critical kind of person. He sort of ingested everything. And it all came out in his pattern. So it didn't matter what you said about him. It all worked somehow. But Smith really felt that Eliade's approach to criticism, to the understanding of religion, was not gonna carry us forward. And he then used Eliade, I think frequently, as a kind of foil to highlight his own approach and his own recommendations for the direction of the field.

On a personal basis however, I think they were really quite close friends. They spent a lot of time together. And at least as Jonathan would often make reference to Eliade, it was always done in the most sort of cordial, generous, friendly open kind of terms. So from the perspective of the writings that Smith did about Eliade, it appears, I think really quite different than I think that reflects accurately their personal relationship.

Keely McMurray: Ordeal, ordination, orgy, orientation, pagan, paradise, passion, paths, patriarchal, penance, perfectionism, periodic rites, phallic worship, plausibility structure.

Carole: What I remember is mostly meeting with him, telling him everything I was doing, and he would say yeah, and I would leave and not remember anything we'd done. He's really, as you must know, an incredibly charismatic man.

Chris Lehrich: Well, he was very intense. I think probably everybody who spent any significant time with Jonathan had the experience of discovering that. On the one hand, he could be an extraordinarily attentive listener and listen very closely. And on the other hand, if he wasn't in that mood, he would just talk and you just sort of sat there like a lump and listened. And he would just talk on and on and on. And then he would kind of pause, and you'd say a couple things, and that would start him off again. And then he would talk.

Sam Gill: I think he was ... I think his humor is really fundamental to who the man was. He loved to see the humorous aspect of things, and in a way that highlighted their depth, their humanity, their significance, their importance, and I just feel like that's a very rich part of Jonathan's heritage that we all need to appreciate and accept.

Amir Hussain: In 1992, the University of Toronto did a conference to honor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. And they brought in a number of key speakers including Jonathan, I say Jonathan zedd Smith as a Canadian. I still use the zedd instead of the z there. My name is Amir Hussain. I'm a professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University, which is the Jesuit University in Los Angeles, did my PhD at the University of Toronto so I've known Russ McCutcheon and Matt Krab since graduate school days.

Even then, this is over 25 years ago, Jonathan had this reputation as the great historian of religion really in North America. And so his reputation certainly preceded him. And he comes to the conference. And I thought this is going to be interesting, because at that time I didn't know his work really. Well, I'd read a couple little things. But very different in orientation from Wilfred Smith's kind of work. But Jonathan gave this lovely talk that was reprinted. And I think Russell actually did the work on it for Method and Theory in the Study of Religion. That journal printed the keynote talks that was there. And his talk was looking at the fact that when Jonathan Smith first started sort of teaching, I think at Dartmouth, he used Wilfred's Meaning and End of Religion.

And so there's a really interesting connection of here's this guy who you wouldn't think has a lot in common with this other guy other than the last name, but yet they have a really interesting connection here. And so there's Jonathan speaking. And you know, as I said earlier, the persona is just fascinating 'cause you look at this guy and he's got the hat, he's got the long hair that comes out in the pyramid shape. He's got the beard, he's got the walking stick. So he looks striking there. He gives his talk. And it was just this amazing kind of talk. But then, it's just ... and this is the thing I emailed Russell about, was Don Wiebe, who's one of our mentors at the University of Toronto, a great [inaudible 00:22:32] scholar, kind of gets on Jonathan for something or other. I can't remember what it was, but the phrase "logical positivism" came out.

And he kept poking at Jonathan, talking about him being a logical positivist, logical positivist, and Smith finally just sort of loses it up at the podium. And I'm trying to do his voice, but you can't do his voice. But it really was that, "Jesus Don! You're like a pig on a truffle hunt. I'm a logical positivist. Fine! Here I stand a logical positivist." But just that "Jesus Don! You're like a pig on a truffle hunt." It was just amazing to me. As an off the cuff sort of remark, to come up with that analogy was just astounding. And then it was really lovely because at the end of the conference, it was like a 2, 3 day conference. They brought Jonathan up at the end when they were doing the thank yous. And Don, I think, presented him with like a chocolate truffle, which is at this priceless kind of moment.

Don Weibe:

Giving him a tough time about being a positivist? Actually it was the other way around. I was giving him a tough time as a positivist for his crypto theology. My name is Done Wiebe. I teach at the University of Toronto, faculty of Divinity of Trinity College, which is a federated institution with the University of Toronto. Yeah, he put it this way. "Don, you're like a pig after truffles."

Now, the conference itself was set up to honor Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Nevertheless, we had about \$10,000 left in those days in our kitty before we each left the center. And we decided to honor Wilfred Cantwell Smith and brought Jonathan Z in as one of the big speakers. And I felt as Jonathan was delivering his paper that he was far too close to Wilfred Cantwell Smith type thinking. And so I said something to the effect, "Jonathan, why is this not just another kind of theology?" At which point he said, "God" or "Jesus Christ, you're

like a pig after truffles." That wasn't my first experience with Jonathan though. But it was typical of other experiences.

Well you know this started actually early. I think it was Ivan Strinsky and me who had asked Hans Penner and Jonathan Z Smith to help us form a kind of, you know, group within AAR itself that would just look at religion from a scientific point of view. And they just said it can't be done. We had a pleasant conversation. We left it with that. And then several years later, Tom Lawson, Luther Martin and I, at the IAHR meeting in Sydney Australia, tried this again, now outside the framework of the AAR. And I think it was probably that earlier conversation with Hans Penner and Jonathan Z that kind of gave us the courage to go back to him and ask him to get involved.

Jack Neusner was at the conference in Australia as well. And we got him involved. And then Jack bought several memberships, one for himself and one for Jonathan zedd Smith, or Z Smith. And so Jonathan became a member of the NASR just at its very birth. But Jonathan didn't much appreciate, or thought it was rather odd that Jack Neusner would sign him up with out his permission. And so, as I've been told this story, Jonathan signed Jack up to the Marxist Association in the United States, gave him a free membership there, just to give him a gift back.

Keely McMurray: Relics, remnant, repentance, resurrection, revelation, revenant, reversal, rites of passage, sabbath, sacrifice, sage, saint.

Sam Gill: Well ... and that is check your sources. So I think Smith's work began with his studies of Frazer's The Golden Bough. And as he told his students back in the early days, when he studied Frazer's The Golden Bough ... this is an enormous work with thousands of documents contributing to it. Smith said that as he read what Frazer read, he would actually go talk to people that also read these same works, and discuss those. So this gave him this enormous body of material to work with. But what was most important to Smith, particularly as he focused on The Golden Bough, was how did Frazer use his sources?

And he felt that Frazer used them in a way that was almost always not accurate. And so much of Smith's work is simply saying, "I'm just gonna check the sources of the people that I'm reading." And in checking those sources, one discovers then not the errors so much as the story of the development of one's way of thinking, of a whole field of study, all those kinds of things. So my book, Storytracking, is really ... which it took me 5 years to research, is really starting with an incident that Eliade had quoted, focused on Australian aboriginal people and spending years and years simply tracking down the source to the source to the source to the source to try to get back to the original person. And that then revealed this entire story that was part of the development of the field. So check your sources. So I've always taught my students that.

Ron Cameron.: I think that what he was doing could be called an anthropology of the enlightenment. He doesn't, of course, go outside. He never liked to travel much. But the anthropology that he enlightens what he's doing with all the history and the footnotes to wanna see how it is that we got to understand what it is that we know and where we might go from there. And that's really his agenda. So if one can really come to grips with Jonathan's emphasis, not just on theory, but emphasis on intellectual sense making, his intellectual anthropology, that's at the heart of what he's about.

Chris Lehrich: I mean, if I'm entirely honest with you I think the great tragedy in the sense of Jonathan's career, whether it's the analytical work on religion and ritual and so forth, or the material in teaching or whatever, is that awful lot of talk and awful lot of citations, but I don't think there's very much influence at all. I was at the NASR meeting, I don't know, four or five years ago or something, when this book called Teaching Religion came out. And there was a lot of people there, scholars of all ages who had kind of theoretical, J Z Smith whatever, kind of credentials. And they started this whole conversation about how his dictum that there's no data for religion was just obviously stupid and idiotic.

And I think the same thing is true in teaching. You see there was that kind of response review thing in JAR, which was quite negative. I think fundamentally, people don't want to be influenced by JZ Smith. They wanna say they're influenced by JZ Smith. But they don't really want that. They don't want religion to be a construct. They want it really to refer to something, but they wanna pretend that they think in a very sophisticated way. The same goes for the teaching. They wanna think vaguely, "Oh, I'm thinking these interesting ideas and challenging," and whatever.

But in the end, people wanna teach kind of Judaism/Christianity/Islam. That's gonna be a good course. The kids will love that. They wanna start off with, "Well, first you have to get the facts. You have to get the information. Later on, we'll deal with theory and stuff like that," setting aside entirely the fact that without any kind of theory or framework or whatever, those facts mean nothing. You can't do anything with them. Nobody really wants to take on what Jonathan proposed pretty much across his career.

Don Weibe: Jonathan, I suppose from my point of view, was one of the most relaxed scholars in religious studies that I ever experienced. He was not uptight about it. He wasn't uptight about criticism. And yet, in my experience, I don't think there was anybody in the field then or now who is sharper on his feet than Jonathan zedd Smith. I mean, he was just ... and he was, for all his criticism, which could be very cutting indeed, it was never a personal attack on anyone. It was just a matter of discussing and debating the issues. And on that one, I remember one experience with Jonathan relatively recent in which I had pressed him and Burt and Mack and a few others on what in the world they meant by the notion of "re-description," the task of re-description?

I said, "Does it mean you describe it again, you describe it in a different way, or is there a theoretical element here?" And we didn't get anywhere. That was a NASR session. And Jonathan was in on a panel on re-description in an AAR session. And I was sitting in about the third row with Luther Markin. And before the session started, Jonathan pointed his finger at me to draw me up to the dais. So I went up there. And he very quietly said, "Don't raise the re-description issue here." And the way he did it, it was both electric, and I think an acknowledgement that there was a problem with the terminology. But it was a joke. It was fun. He didn't get uptight. I loved him.

Carole: When I thought about my relationship with him, what I recall is his incredible generosity as a teacher. He made himself available to me when I was a college sophomore. He was not off putting. He was kind and welcoming and supportive all the way through my career at the University of Chicago. He helped me get into classes. He helped me write proposals in the Divinity School. He helped me construct ... I changed fields while I was there. I started off in Greek studies, which is why I worked with him, and then shifted to Colonial Brazilian Studies. And he stayed with me right through it and helped me workout what I needed to know to move.

He wrote me a really touching note. I sent him a copy, a bound copy, of my dissertation in the year after I left. And he sent a note back to me saying thanks, and that he hoped I would someday understand that this is one of the best moments for a teacher when a student goes out into the world. And I still have that. It's really very touching. That was his view of his students that he would help them and support them to move on.

Ron Cameron.: He is in fact, to use a word otherwise he would not use, he in fact is unique and sui generis. He is not just individual. He's Jonathan Z Smith. And we'll probably never see another one like him again in our lifetime.

Keely McMurray: Spirits, state religion, suffering, sui generis, supernatural beings, tabernacle, talisman [inaudible 00:35:54]

Mike Alltman: Jonathan Z Smith passed away on December 30th 2017.

Keely McMurray: Temple, ten commandments, [inaudible 00:36:04]

Mike Alltman: Smith wrote over 400 unattributed entries in the Harper Collins dictionary of religion that he edited and published in 1995. You've heard a few of those entries throughout this episode, and they are remarkable for their breadth and diversity.

Keely McMurray: Tradition, trance, transcendence, transfiguration, translation [inaudible 00:36:32]

Mike Altman: Special thanks to Smith's colleagues and students who spoke to us. Special thanks also to Keely McMurray who read all of those dictionary entries. The introduction that opened the episode was Ann Taves introducing Smith when he gave the Lifetime of Learning address at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 2010. This episode was produced by me, Mike Altman, with help from our production assistant, Ciara Lawson. Study Religion is a production of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama.

Keely McMurray: World religions, World's Parliament of Religions, worldview, Worldwide Church of God, Yeshiva, Zen, Zion, Zwingli.