Future Prospects in the Comparison of Religions

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Jonathan Z. Smith famously remarked that "a comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge."[1] One of the insights that has animated the study of comparative religion in the past several decades is that those doing the comparing must be aware of the kinds of knowledge they are serving. Said another way, scholars involved in the comparison of religions must confront questions such as: Why compare this one tradition with another? Does the comparison of two entire traditions, as opposed to comparing two persons, give the scholar too much leeway in constructing his or her own narrative? Does the comparison of two traditions or individuals lead to false dichotomies that serve an unspoken agenda? In short, what is the purpose of comparison?

The questions involved in the act of comparison will become more prominent in LDS communities as more Latter-day Saints engage in the academic study of religion. Mormons, in general, have struggled with these questions primarily because they reveal that the primary purpose of comparison is often the reassertion of our own truth claims. Our comparisons all too often bend the evidence to fit our predetermined narrative, most of the time by identifying similarities in two or more traditions that serve to highlight the correct practice of our own. I will call this, as we proceed, a kind of structuralist model of the comparison of religions since it presumes universal structures or patterns at work in religion (usually patterns assumed to be revealed by God, or universal modes of thinking presumed to be inherent in the human mind). What I would like to do in the next few minutes is to describe some of the history of this model and briefly propose an alternative model of comparison, one that I will call an interactive model of the comparison of religions. While this model also has shortcomings, it has more potential to be academically sound and at the same time religiously meaningful to Latter-day Saints.

Comparison, as I am discussing it here, is not necessarily re-

stricted to the act of examining different religious traditions. The process of comparison can be done within the same religious tradition by looking at various facets of the tradition across space or time. In fact, some scholars assert that the act of comparison is so ubiquitous in religious studies that comparison itself is the defining characteristic of religious studies as a discipline. In this light, Latter-day Saints compare when they analyze the ascension narratives in ancient Israel, Egypt, and Mesoamerica; but they also compare when talking about washing and anointing in Old Testament and modern-day temples. Comparison also occurs when relating nineteenth-century Mormonism to the nineteenth-century Shaker movement, or the twenty-first-century Church in America to the twenty-first-century Church in Africa. In this broad sense, Latter-day Saint scholars do not uniformly participate in a structuralist model of the comparison of religions; however, such a model seems to be *a* dominant, if not *the* dominant, paradigm among LDS scholars.

At the same time, I want to stress a main point regarding a structuralist model of the comparison of religions: LDS scholars, or scholars with religious beliefs, are not the only people to sometimes employ such a model. The field of comparative religion has a long history of attempting to effortlessly analyze different cultures as part of a single study, and of presuming it unproblematic to examine multiple time periods of one tradition in the same work on the basis of universally normative patterns. E. B. Tylor, a nineteenth-century professor of anthropology and a major theorist of religion, for instance, asserted a universal structure of the human mind in his theory known as the "ascent of man."[2] In this view, primitive people noticed that human beings seemed to be animated by some unseen force, evidenced by the fact that bodies of deceased human beings seemed to lack this force after death. This observation led people to believe that other things such as the sun, water, wind, etc., were also animated by unseen forces. So, according to Tylor, we find the beginning of religion here in these observations—all religion; and it is deeply embedded in the mind of all human beings. As one more contemporary scholar explained, for Tylor "all the world is a single country."[3] Indeed, understanding one place or one tradition, for Tylor, is to understand them all. Max Müller, often seen as a founding figure of compara-

tive religion, writing in roughly the same time period as Tylor, sought the universal structure of religion in the development of language. It is worth noting that Müller was instrumental in establishing the notion of "world religions," which is still very much a dominant paradigm in the field of religious studies today.[4]

More recently, scholars such as Mircea Eliade have argued for a phenomenological approach to comparative religion where time and place may vary, but in which purported manifestations of the sacred remain. Hence we can move from one culture to another and identify common "patterns" (following Eliade) of religious experience. All religious traditions, for instance, exhibit a "nostalgia for Paradise" where the world and human beings were originally created in purity but fell into the profane, so human beings seek to re-create the conditions of paradise.[5]

Critics of Eliade's work have noted problems with its decontextualized nature, its assumption of a shared sacred, and its unintended consequence of distorting the objects of study so that they fit a predetermined religious pattern. This last problem bears some semblance to the critique of the structuralist model mentioned above so I will expand on it here. If all religions exhibit a nostalgia for Paradise, for instance, we go into the various cultures of the world looking for such a nostalgia. If we look hard enough, we will find it everywhere, but only after much searching and ignoring other, perhaps more dominant, paradigms. In early China, for instance, the creation of the world is not a central part of most religious narratives, and the earliest human civilizations are not usually depicted as beginning in states of purity.

A primary challenge that contemporary scholars raise with regard to these paradigms of the past is best summarized under the rubric of "Orientalism." The term "Orientalism" was, of course, popularized in Edward Said's 1978 book of that title (New York: Pantheon Books). Said's point was to argue that Western perceptions of the East—in particular perceptions of Islamic culture—were a hodge-podge of semi-accurate descriptions compiled to serve political ends. Depicting the East as emotional and the West as rational, for instance, justified colonial rule since rationality must control emotion in order to ensure a stable society. Elements of Eastern culture that did not fit the preconception of the East as emotional were ignored. Similarly, comparativists of the past

have constructed a kind of convenient religious "other" to further a variety of ends. The term "Confucianism," it is worth noting, is not translated from a Chinese term. It actually comes from Europe in the mid-nineteenth century and was created partially so that China would fit the pattern of world religions.

The field of comparative religion, generally speaking, has, throughout its history, been guilty of at least three kinds of Orientalisms. The first I call a barbaric Orientalism. This is where one party depicts the other as the barbarian while depicting itself as the genteel; or the other is described as being crude, while the party doing the describing is considered refined. This is, for the most part, what Said focuses on. The second kind of Orientalism is exotic Orientalism. Here, members of one group depict the other as everything they wish themselves to be. The other, in this case, serves as a convenient foil with which to criticize aspects of the describer's society. Eastern religion, it is often said, focuses on a one-ness with the natural world, while Western religion focuses on controlling the natural world. An exotification of the East was a key component of the nineteenth-century transcendental movement's critique of Western culture. The third kind of Orientalism, I call chauvinistic Orientalism. This is where one group recasts the other as a lesser form of itself. Both traditions or individuals are described as part of the same family, but one becomes the younger sibling of the other. We see this kind of Orientalism in much of the LDS scholarship mentioned above. It is even suggested in the title of such courses offered at Church institutions as "The Gospel and the World's Religions."

In responding to these critiques, the field of comparative religion has done several things including restricting the scope of comparison. Books with titles such as *Confucianism and Christianity* are being replaced by books with titles such as *Mencius and Aquinas*.[6] By restricting the scope of comparison, the theory is that the author is less able to construct a kind of ideal-type Confucianism with which to compare an ideal-type Christianity.

Another move that those in the field of comparative religion have made is to compare three figures instead of two—thereby lessening the chance of creating false dichotomies.

Some in the field of comparative religion have also moved toward what I call an interactive model of the comparison of reli-

gions. These segments of the field include scholars such as Arvind Sharma, who argues for a method of "reciprocal illumination" (where both traditions shed light on each other), and Aaron Stalnaker, who speaks about comparison as a kind of inverse hermeneutic in which we use the unfamiliar to reinterpret the familiar.[7]

Building on the work of these scholars, an interactive model of comparison where Mormonism serves as the familiar might do the following.

1. Note vague similarities (or stark differences) between a specific aspect of Mormonism and a specific aspect of another religious tradition. Joseph Smith, for instance, emphasized rituals for the purpose of properly relating the individual to the larger social and sacred world; Confucius seems to do the same. I use the word "seems" here on purpose. These similarities need be only a kind of vague node of consensus. In other words, at this stage, we allow shallow similarities to potentially mask deep levels of difference. So here we invoke a certain degree of what can be called "interpretive elasticity," in which we allow our selected categories to work with less precision than we otherwise would.

2. Deeply immerse ourselves in the unfamiliar. At this stage of comparison, we work to understand the unfamiliar in its own context, relatively independent of the familiar. We engage in a kind of archeology of meaning and aim for lucid descriptions of the unfamiliar, where lucidity is defined by the community of interpreters seeking to understand this material. Put into terminology that Latter-day Saints are perhaps more familiar with, we seek to become native speakers in the language of the unfamiliar. Yet an important step in the process of immersion is to not stop there. In addition to becoming native speakers, we seek to become native listeners where we suspend our value judgments—at least to the degree that such is possible—and strive to listen to, or understand, the world in terms of the unfamiliar. This step is a kind of productive disorientation, where we find ourselves in the midst of something new.

3. Reinterpret the familiar in light of the previously unfamiliar. Where I described the previous step as a kind of productive disorientation, this step can be described as a kind of constructive reorientation. At this stage of comparison, we ask questions such

as: How would Confucius understand Joseph Smith's theory of ritual? What questions would he raise, and how might Joseph respond? This is a rather creative endeavor because things such as authorial intent and a full understanding of both contexts lie beyond the interpreter's ability to ascertain. Yet our deep immersion in both traditions *should* lead to responsible interactions.

At this stage we do more than think *about* other religious traditions; additionally, we learn to think *with* other religious traditions—both thinking *along with* them and thinking *with their terms*. As such, we open up new windows of meaning to our own community of faith. For instance, as I discussed in the last Faith and Knowledge conference, Confucian theories of ritual highlight the otherwise neglected aspect of embodiment in Mormon ritual.[8] Cast in the language of metaphor theory, we understand Mormon ritual *as* Confucian ritual; keeping in mind that the metaphorical "as" is fraught with tension. Mormon ritual is like, but at the same time, remains unlike Confucian ritual.[9] Neither tradition or religious figure is reduced to the other.

In pursuing an interactive approach, we might think about other comparative projects that Mormons could engage in: How would Dignaga pray? How would Black Elk read the Book of Mormon? What would Guru Nanak think of the King Follett sermon? How would Zoroaster understand the endowment? And, how would a Rastafari interpret the Word of Wisdom?

In contrast to the structuralist model mentioned previously, an interactive model is not caught up in explaining connections. Indeed, a central problem of the structuralist approach is its fixation on explaining why things are similar. Such a complex venture requires not only a vast knowledge of history, but also engagement with other universalist theories predicated on linguistics and cognitive science—not to mention the fact that such a venture must also remain sensitive to the observer's own theological presuppositions. Paraphrasing one of my mentors, John Berthrong, simply making sure that the parties being compared have even a shallow point of convergence takes up an immense amount of time.[10]

Rather than establishing a connection between two traditions by means of history, linguistics, or theology, an interactive model of comparison establishes a connection by means of the compar-

ativist's superimpression on the material. In other words, instead of arguing that ascension theories in the Bible and Mesoamerica are similar because of a historical or theological connection, the interactive comparativist personally *observes* or *renders* them similar so that they can be brought into interaction with each other. The objects of comparison may or may not have an ontological connection; however the interactive comparativist is not primarily concerned with such a connection. Rather the issue of primary importance is how different readings of seemingly similar things can highlight previously unconsidered insights. For Latter-day Saints such an orientation should serve as a novel and interesting model of comparison, where "interest" is defined in terms of new grounds to explore, new conversation partners that raise fresh questions, and new windows of meaning for an increasingly diverse membership in our community of faith.

Notes

1. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52.

2. E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871).

3. Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 21.

4. On the development of this paradigm, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The point here, in short, is that the concept of "religion" is born of particular (i.e., Western) historical circumstances. However, it is often presumed to be a universal concept found throughout the world.

5. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (1959; rpt., Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt Books, 1987), esp. 92.

6. Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (New York: Kodansha International, 1977); Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

7. Aaron Stalnaker, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunzi and Augustine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006); Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Meth-*

odology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

8. Michael D. K. Ing, presentation published as "Ritual as a Process of Deification," *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 39–55.

9. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, translated by Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Buffalo, N.Y.: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 6. For more on metaphor theory, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

10. John H. Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 7.

The Fabulous Jesus: A Heresy of Reconciliation

Scott D. Davis

Let me begin by stating that this is not an academic paper; there's no bibliography. It is, rather, a personal reflection addressing the difficult questions of reconciling faith and the academy—many of which have already been raised today.

I hope that you are amused by the title of my talk. I hope that you are envisioning Jesus brunching by the Sea of Galilee, wearing bejeweled Armani sunglasses and a pashmina ascot, sipping mimosas and flamboyantly expounding the homosexual agenda with an Aramaic lisp. I also hope you are thoroughly baffled, maybe even a little offended—although this crowd seems shameless. Those among you who are New Testament scholars are required to be annoyed by this ludicrous and anachronistic characterization of Jesus. Faithful members of the Church will be deeply troubled by the mimosas. But however ludicrous, ahistorical, or