

As Presently Constituted: Mormon Studies in the Field of Religion

Editor's note: These pieces were part of a panel discussion of Mormon Studies in the academy at the Mormon History Association's Annual Meeting in 2013. Also included in that discussion was a paper by Melissa Inouye, "The Oak and the Banyan: The 'Glocalization' of Mormon Studies," which was published in the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's Mormon Studies Review, vol. 1. We encourage Dialogue readers to read it and become familiar with the Review and the NAMI's other publications at their website: <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/periodicals/mormon-studies-review/>.

MICHAEL D. K. ING is an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University. He holds a BA from Brigham Young University and a PhD from Harvard University. His book, *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2012.

DAVID J. HOWLETT is a visiting assistant professor of religion at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, where he teaches about American religious history. He is the author of *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space* (University of Illinois Press, 2014).

JOHN-CHARLES DUFFY is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Religion at Miami University. He holds a PhD in religious studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He specializes in the religious history of the United States.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AS COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Michael D. K. Ing

This paper is entitled "Religious Studies as Comparative Religion," and its purpose is to suggest that comparative religion,

as one way of engaging in religious studies, can be fruitful for historians of Mormonism.

In the next few pages I will focus on the project of “comparison” in religious studies; but not comparison in terms of looking for similarities or differences in two or more traditions, figures, or time periods. Rather, I will speak about comparison in the sense of scholars creating a shared vocabulary that opens up space for cross-cultural examination. I will try to use my work on ritual in early Confucianism to demonstrate how this might be done, with the implication that historians of Mormonism might also look to their own work in contributing to other conversations, as well as looking to the work of others that may not involve Mormonism for the purpose of gaining fresh insight into Mormonism. I believe the results of taking up a comparative approach will be two-fold: one, we will see new and innovative work in the study of Mormonism; and two, we will see those in scholarly and popular circles take the study of Mormonism more seriously. So, I will begin by speaking about comparative religion in the context of religious studies, and then move on to talk about a Confucian theory of ritual.

Now, to *do* comparative religion is to contribute to a shared vocabulary about how human beings describe their ultimate concerns. The act of comparison is predicated not on universalistic assumptions about common experiences with a transcendent, but rather on a hope in commensurability. In other words, comparison is built on the chance that we, human beings, can speak to each other in ways by which we come to perhaps not fully, but largely, understand each other’s perspectives, feelings, and motivations. This is of course easier for those living in the same time, speaking the same language, and meeting face to face, but if carefully done this might extend to people living in other areas, speaking other languages, and even living in different times.

Religious studies, in this light, is not so much a discipline as it is a field; yet it is not a field in the sense of providing an area where we find objects of study. Rather, religious studies is a field in the sense of providing an arena of discussion for scholars studying human beings. It is a space for learning about and

exploring human possibility. Scholars of religious studies, as I am discussing them here today, take people's descriptions of their ultimate concerns and render them intelligible for others. They take things such as the Jonestown massacre, the Koran, or the Navajo *kinata* ceremony, and explain how human beings might kill themselves in the name of God, might believe that an illiterate man wrote a book after conversing with angels, or might stay up all night with the chants of a medicine man in order to move from the status of girl to woman. Said more personally, one job of comparative religion is to show how *I* might have been otherwise. It teaches how we, or you, or *I*, might have conceived of Captain Cook as the god Lono when Cook came to Hawaii in 1778, or how *I* might believe in the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, or even how *I* might have pulled the trigger at Mountain Meadows. Borrowing from Jonathan Z. Smith, who paraphrased the Roman playwright Terence, the act of comparison is coming to understand that nothing human is foreign to me.¹ As such, doing comparative religion entails cultivating values such as sympathy, critical curiosity, and even consternation.²

Comparative religion, however, does not stop at rendering others intelligible. One of my colleagues, David Haberman, a scholar of South Asian religion, is fond of drawing on Clifford Geertz's statement that "Anthropologists don't study villages . . . they study *in* villages."³ In other words, from Geertz's view the location of our study is the point of departure from which we connect the particular to the general, or the local to the global. We take the specifics of one person (or people) living in one place and one time and bring them into dialogue with the shared concerns of others.⁴ So in this view, a study of tree worship in India becomes an opportunity for others to rethink their relationship with the environment, a study of rabbinic views on death becomes an opportunity for others to reexamine their own frailty, and a study of Confucian ritual becomes an opportunity for others to reconsider the relationship between their hopes and fears. Comparative religion, in this light, is communal and personal. It is communal in the sense of contributing to a community of people invested in studying similar questions, and personal in the sense

of engendering introspection. Borrowing from a contemporary scholar named Wu Kwangming, comparison is the full process of metaphor—we move from the familiar to understand the unfamiliar, but the process is only complete when we reinterpret the familiar in terms of the unfamiliar. Wu explains this two-part process as that which “yield[s] a novel world.”⁵

Now, in the remaining pages of this paper I would like to turn to my own work to demonstrate how this kind of comparison might be done.⁶ One of the texts I work on is called the *Record of Ritual*. It purports to be the writings of Confucius’s disciples, which would place it in the 5th century BCE, although it was redacted, and likely authored, three or four hundred years later. The text, as its title suggests, is concerned with ritual, and large parts of it focus on mourning rites. These rites, I argue, are, among other things, about an apprehensive hope. Mourners anticipate the transformative power of ritual, while realizing that ritual is a trepidatious act. This enables Confucians, as we will see, to live in a world where both hope and fear are realities.

To talk about these mourning rites more specifically, one of the first rites that occurs after someone has died is the “calling back ceremony” (*fu* 復) where a mourner climbs on top of the deceased’s house to call his or her spirit back to the body. Later rites include the practice of putting objects into the tomb of the deceased that do not quite work—zithers, for instance, are placed in the grave but their strings are not properly tuned—and this, the *Record of Ritual* tell us, is done because the dead are no longer alive so they cannot use the items, yet, in its view, neither they are fully gone.⁷

The portion of the rites I would like to focus on occurs after the calling back ceremony and before the burial. In this section of the rites, which we might call the funeral procession, mourners follow the carriage carrying the body of the deceased to the grave. The *Record of Ritual* explains that mourners should do this as if the deceased were still alive. The chapter entitled “Asking about Mourning” (“Wensang” 問喪) describes this as follows:

In following [the funeral procession to the grave], mourners were expectant and anxious as if they sought to follow [the

deceased] but could not quite catch up to him. When returning, they wailed; and were hesitant and uneasy as if they sought after [the deceased], but did not find him. As such, when mourners follow [the funeral procession to the grave] it is as if they long to see [the deceased]; and when they return it is as if they are bewildered [in not being able to find him].

Regardless of where they sought him, he could not be found. They entered the door to his home, but did not find him there. They ascended up into the main hall, but did not find him there. They entered his personal quarters, but did not find him there. Alas, he was gone; only to be mourned, and never to be seen again!

This is why mourners wail, shed tears, beat their chests, and falter. They stop doing these things only after they fully exhaust their sorrow. Their hearts are despondent, morose, perplexed, and aggrieved to the point that they lose their focus and there is nothing but sorrow.

其往送也，望望然、汲汲然、如有追而弗及也。其反哭也，皇皇然若有求而弗得也。故其往送也如慕，其反也如疑。求而無所得之也，入門而弗見也，上堂又弗見也，入室又弗見也。亡矣！喪矣！不可復見矣！故哭泣辟踊，盡哀而止矣。心悵焉、愴焉、惚焉、愴焉，心絕志悲而已矣。⁸

This portion of the *Record of Ritual* maintains that mourners should follow the funeral procession to the grave as if they were traveling to catch up to the person while still alive; and after not finding him, they are to return to his home and call for him, hoping to find him there. When failing to find him at home, mourners “exhaust their sorrow” 盡哀 by wailing and shedding tears. The sorrow of losing a loved one reaches a heightened pitch as mourners fully confront the absence of the person. They are despondent to the point that “they lose their focus and there is nothing but sorrow” 心絕志悲而已矣. What is interesting here is that the text does not make the argument that these rites are necessarily effective in bringing the dead back to life; rather, the mourners should not fully expect the rite to alter the course of death.

In these mourning rites, we might say, mourners come to recognize the vulnerability of their hoped-for world to forces beyond their control. Indeed, what we see in these Confucian rites is a series of practices meant to confront this vulnerability. Mourners project their hope onto what we might call a dysfunctional world—a world of power, disorder, and anomie. Yet these mourners know that their mourning rites might not actually change things. Stated more strongly, mourners perform these rites to demonstrate their awareness of the fragility of their hoped-for world. In other words, these rites show how the socially constructed arena where our proper desires find fulfillment is often impinged on by the brute forces of disorder. The mourning rites, as such, become a means of navigating the tension between the desired world and the dysfunctional world. They become a kind of performative therapy for dealing with dissonance. Following this view, ritual is done to display one's understanding that one's best efforts are often frustrated by the dysfunctional world—that people do in fact die, but if it were up to us they would remain.

These mourning rites are particularly apt for demonstrating this point. Death presents a kind of ambivalence for many human beings.⁹ Our desire to accept finality in death conflicts with our hope for continuing a meaningful relationship with the deceased. Mourning rites, as such, become an important means of coping with ambivalence—they allow us to live in a world of hope *and* fear. The intrusion of the dysfunctional world into the socially constructed world becomes an occasion for the creation and performance of ritual. Yet ritual does not dissolve the tension between these worlds; instead it provides a way of navigating the tension.

Part of what makes the socially constructed world meaningful is the possibility of intrusion. The dysfunctional world is dangerous. It kills indiscriminately and is savage. The vulnerability of the socially constructed world to dysfunction means that everyone living in such a world lives with risk. Yet this risk itself partially renders life worthwhile. If relationships lasted forever, for instance, there would be fewer reasons to cultivate relationships now. The

threat of loss can lead to morbidity and depression, but it can also inspire the virtuous treatment of others.¹⁰ The uncertainty of the ritual world, in this sense, “mobilizes [the] energies” necessary for the appropriate treatment of others.¹¹

In the mourning rites discussed throughout the *Record of Ritual*, the failure to fully transform the dysfunctional world such that death does not occur is integral to the success of the mourning rites themselves. Proper performance is a vulnerable performance where the more genuine one’s hope of finding the deceased still alive when searching their home, the more genuine one’s sorrow when confronting their absence. These rituals, as mentioned in other portions of the *Record of Ritual*, must push the performer to the brink of madness.¹² The ritual agent, as such, takes upon him or herself the risk of going beyond the brink. This kind of flirtation with failure enables the success of the rites.

In performing the mourning rites, a state of vulnerability is preferred over a state of invulnerability. Stated more broadly, human beings, in this view, should not render themselves invulnerable to relationships that are contingent on the erratic nature of the dysfunctional world. These relationships, at least partially, constitute a meaningful life. The real possibility of the dysfunctional world impinging itself on our lives opens up opportunities for deep engagement with other human beings. It provides motivation to care for others, allows one to fully experience human sentiment, and creates space for continued reflection on the question of what constitutes a meaningful life. These mourning rites, as such, instead of simply attempting to create an “as is” world, also create a kind of “as if” space where performers enact a therapy of honesty in confronting a bewildering world. Or put more simply, from a Confucian perspective, the performance of ritual is often the very performance of ambivalence.

Now, I have only provided a brief and insufficiently argued account of Confucian mourning rites. A more fitting account would robustly describe the mourning rites as depicted in the *Record of Ritual* while remaining sensitive to the text’s historical composition, other early Chinese texts it might be in dialogue with, and a host of other issues.

While I have tried to phrase my interpretation of the *Record of Ritual* in a way that is already suggestive for others studying similar issues, my next step in the comparative project would be to situate the theory of ritual described here among other accounts of ritual. This next step serves to more explicitly enter the arena for creating a cross-cultural vocabulary of ritual. In broad steps, I might compare the theory outlined previously with theories advocated by Mircea Eliade or Axel Michaels, which describe ritual as actions that seek to change the world into a new and better place.¹³ Or, alternatively, I might compare it with theories advocated by J. Z. Smith and Adam Seligman, which describe ritual in terms of its subjunctive properties.¹⁴ In other words, for Smith and Seligman, rituals are actions that work to create an “as if” or illusory world, in opposition to in Eliade’s and Michaels’ views, where rituals work to transform the mundane world into the sacred world.

To bring this into the study of Mormonism, the Confucian theory of ritual I have portrayed opens up questions such as: What are various Mormon ways of mourning? How have Mormons explained situations where ritual does not transform the world the way it might be intended to? Does ambivalence play a role in Mormon religiosity? And, more generally, from diverse Mormon perspectives, what meaningful things in life are vulnerable to powers beyond our control? Further, in thinking beyond the practice of history, this approach opens up the possibility for comparative theology in the sense of asking how Confucian theories of ritual might inform a Mormon culture of mourning; and how Mormon conceptions of death might speak to Confucian concerns of loss.

To briefly summarize, what I have attempted to do in this essay is to show how I aim to utilize my work on early Confucianism in a comparative context. I employed the term “comparative religion” in speaking about this context. In short, comparative religion entails rendering the ultimate concerns of human beings intelligible to other human beings. It also involves contributing to larger conversations about those concerns, which in turn should lead to a reinterpretation of that which we study.

Notes

1. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 111.

2. “Critical curiosity” is a modification of Aaron Stalnaker’s “curious suspicion” in “Judging Others: History, Ethics, and the Purposes of Comparison,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 3 (2008): 440.

3. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 22.

4. This idea comes from Jonathan Wyn Schofer’s response to Stalnaker’s “Judging Others.” See Jonathan Wyn Schofer, “Virtues and Vices of Relativism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 4 (2008): 709–15.

5. Kwang-ming Wu, *On Metaphoring: A Cultural Hermeneutic* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 184.

6. A more detailed account of what follows can be found in Michael David Kaulana Ing, *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). This essay in particular draws from pages 204–18.

7. See for instance, D. C. Lau 劉殿爵 and Chen Fong Ching 陳方正, eds., *Liji zhuzi suoyin* 《禮記逐字索引》 Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series 香港中文大學中國文化研究所先秦兩漢古籍逐字索引叢刊 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan 台北: 台湾商务印書館, 1992), “Tangong Shang” 檀弓上 3.69. Hereafter “*Liji*.”

8. *Liji*, “Wensang,” 36.1. All translations are my own.

9. Parts of this were inspired by Susan Letzler Cole, *The Absent One: Mourning Ritual, Tragedy, and the Performance of Ambivalence* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985). On page 9 she comments, “Tragedy is an imaginative model of the paradoxical demands made on human consciousness when confronted by death.”

10. For more on the relationship between ethics and vulnerability see Jonathan Wyn Schofer, *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 183–90.

11. Schofer, *Confronting Vulnerability*, 183.

12. *Liji*, “Jiyi” 祭義, 25.9–11.

13. For Eliade, see *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated by Willard R. Trask, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954). For Michaels, see “Ritual and Meaning,” in *Theorizing Rituals*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2008): 247–61.

14. For Smith, see “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” *History of Religions* 20 no.1–2 (1980):112–27; and *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1987. For Seligman, see Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).



**WHAT DOES KASHI HAVE TO DO WITH SALT LAKE?: ACADEMIC
COMPARISONS, ASIAN RELIGIONS, AND MORMONISM**

David J. Howlett

In a polemical treatise from late antiquity, Tertullian famously asked, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” The readers of this essay might ask a similar rhetorical question of “What does Kashi have to do with Salt Lake?” What could we actually learn from the comparative study of Asian religions with Mormonism? Armed with tools and theories that largely extol the particular over the general, most contemporary scholars have been shaped to be suspicious of comparisons that excise the historical and universalize the local. Comparative projects seem so very retrograde. We snicker when we hear individuals cite comparative works like *The Golden Bough* or theories like phenomenology as authoritative sources or methods. Those projects were so pre-postmodern, we think as we roll our eyes. Nevertheless, I argue that if academic comparisons of Mormonism and Asian religions are disciplined, modest, and pragmatic, Kashi and Salt Lake have much to do with one another.

In this necessarily brief essay, I will suggest two topics and methods in contemporary religious studies that link Asian religions and Mormonism: the first is comparative history and the second is comparative theology. By doing so, I will cover two areas in which I neither am a specialist nor have any serious interest in studying. I am simply trying to show the range of what comparisons may do or how they are employed in current scholarship. Thomas Tweed notes that a theory is useful not just for its explanatory value for other instances but also for its