

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

ability to generate accounts that challenge it.¹ Aware of this, I welcome criticisms of my own thoughts.

When it comes to the value of academic comparisons in religious studies, Jonathan Z. Smith seems to be as valuable of a guide as any to thinking about the topic. Most religious studies scholars have encountered Smith's corpus of works in a methods and theories course where they have read books with wonderful titles like *Drudgery Divine* or *To Take Place: A Theory of Ritual*. Even though Smith mainly analyzes western religions in late antiquity, he typically makes much larger methodological contributions that have rightly made him one of the more influential voices in religious studies over the past generation. Given my essay's limitations, I want to merely quote a few Smithian "proof texts," if you will, on academic comparisons—texts that I think will be good for our own intellectual "improvement."

Firstly, Smith, quoting and extending the ideas of another anthropologist, reminds us that any comparison is never *in toto*. It is always aspectual.² That should chasten our claims about what our comparisons can accomplish. A comparison simply highlights an aspect of two things. But for what end? Here a commonly cited proof text from Smith is helpful: he states that "a comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge."³ A less pithy, but equally insightful statement by Smith is that a "comparison requires the postulation of difference as the grounds of its being interesting (rather than tautological), and a methodological manipulation of difference, a playing across the 'gap' in the service of some useful end."⁴

With these "doctrines" in mind, I would like to briefly suggest how what might seem like an unlikely historical comparison can provide further insight into the dynamics of Mormonism—and in particular, insight into the writing of Mormon history by individuals engaged in "faithful history." In the last twenty years, historiographical reflection on the writing of faithful history in Mormonism has become a topic of great interest among scholars who attend the Mormon History Association, as well as more recently historians associated with the Conference on Faith and History, a group whose core largely includes scholars who identify

as evangelicals. Matthew Bowman, for instance, has compared contemporary Mormon faithful history to various strains of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant Providentialism.⁵ While I think this comparison is sound, I would like to suggest that we need to turn our eyes to the Indian subcontinent to further understand aspects of contemporary Mormon faithful history.

Religious studies scholar Kim Knott notes that contemporary practicing Hindus have powerful motivations for understanding the origins of their religion, which many devotees describe as *sanatana dharma*, or the eternal tradition: one whose origin lies beyond human history. When Hindus seek to understand the origins of their religion, they often do not feel bound “by scholarly evidence and argumentation.” “They are guided first and foremost by revelation,” says Knott. “Where historical evidence can support a devotional view, it may be welcomed, but a firm religious conviction does not require such evidence in order to thrive. It depends rather on faith. For some Hindus, then, all this argument about what happened in early India is only relevant where it accords with what the scriptures tell them.” Conversely, Knott notes that “there are plenty of modern Hindus who feel strongly that scholarly theories and historical data offer important support for what they believe.”⁶ While we might note that Knott is already trying to translate a Hindu dilemma into Western Christian idioms (note her use of “faith” and “revelation” rather than the more precise and complicated terms like *dharma*, *shruti*, and *smriti*), we would be obtuse not to note that what Knott calls Hindu devotional history has responded to history in the academy in ways similar to the reaction of Mormon faithful history—that is, it has responded not by outright rejection, but by selective appropriation.⁷

The difference in how this appropriation is deployed, though, adds an important element in the comparative study of Hindu devotional history and Mormon faithful history. One appropriation can be linked to nationalism (specifically, the assertion of India as a Hindu nation) and the other linked to the international expansion of a hemispheric religion (or, respectively, the late-twentieth-century expansion of the LDS Church outside of North

America). What we see, then, in a comparison of Mormon faithful history and Hindu devotional history should not lead us to a glib assertion of their essential sameness. Instead, it should alert us to how two groups (or more accurately, two groups within groups) with shared aspectual elements use faithful histories to construct “alternative modernities” for varied reasons to serve varied ends.

This brief discussion suggests that we need to occasionally look beyond the local or the national in our historical projects; comparative history helps us do that, bringing subjects into conversation that would otherwise be separated by space, culture, or disciplinary interests. And the payoff is that by doing so, we can learn more about both subjects—and even about a much wider context—in the process of this study.

If comparative projects like the one I just highlighted seek useful historical explanations, comparative theology seeks comparisons for very different ends—namely a disciplined theological understanding of one’s own tradition by studying another. The Jesuit theologian and Harvard professor Francis X. Clooney is one of the most visible advocates for comparative theology. His raft of books bears titles such as *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* and *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnava Hindus*. In a recent synthetic work, Clooney defines comparative theology: it “marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.”⁸ Clooney’s Catholic commitment to a notion of reason connected to natural law allows him a great deal of generosity when dealing with other traditions. For instance, not long ago, Clooney blogged about his experience of reading 3 Nephi in the Book of Mormon—an exercise that he regarded as an act of learning across religious boundaries.⁹ As a member of a tradition known for its missionary work in Asia—missionary work that was inevitably part of political, social, and economic forms of imperialism—Clooney is well aware of how crossing

traditions can be turned into imperialistic appropriation.¹⁰ Still, he is not content to simply live in a theological world that does not learn from the “Other.” And when the Other talks back to Clooney, he is intent on listening. Mormon academics may find Clooney’s project—something that confesses “multiple religious belonging, human but also divine”—as something not very congenial to a tradition that historically has demanded singular belonging.¹¹ However, Clooney’s particular project is not the only way to pursue comparative theology. Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye has gestured toward the possibility of what I see as Mormon comparative theology when she muses on thinking of Mormonism as an Asian religion.¹² Comparative theology may not be for everyone, but, then, to steal a line from Grant Wacker, “neither is professional hockey.”¹³

Whether in careful, methodologically sound historical or theological studies, comparisons inevitably are acts of translation. Early Mormonism itself elevated the concept of translation as something holy, and even routinized it as the function of an office. But whereas the goal of early Mormon translators like Joseph Smith seemed to be to escape from that “little narrow prison” of language,¹⁴ to recapture an ancient Adamic language, in short, to escape all limitations on the transmission of knowledge, the kind of translation to which I refer actually can only achieve . . . well . . . more translation. As anthropologist James Clifford notes, “To use comparative concepts . . . means to become aware, always belatedly, of limits, sedimented meanings, tendencies to gloss over differences. Comparative concepts—translation terms—are approximations, privileging certain ‘originals’ and made for specific audiences. Thus, the broad meanings that enable projects . . . necessarily fail as a consequence of whatever range they achieve.”¹⁵ Finally, then, comparative projects bring us to deeply humanistic ends—ends that acknowledge limits as much as they seek to transcend them. Or, as Michel Foucault once stated, work on our limits “is a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.”¹⁶ That, for him, was enlightenment. This enlightenment is not the moksha of Kashi or the endowment of the Salt Lake temple, but it is a form of liberation worth our patient, disciplined scholarly endeavors.

Notes

1. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 166.

2. J. Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 23–24.

3. J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 52.

4. J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 35.

5. Matthew Bowman, “History Thrown into Divinity: Faith, Knowledge, and the Telling of the Mormon Past,” *Fides et Historia* 45, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 76–91.

6. Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

7. Of course, both projects have at heart an interest in rejecting parts of modern critical inquiry—an inquiry that, in the words of postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty, asserts “that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end ‘social facts,’ that the social somehow exists prior to them.” But this is rejection in part, not *in toto*. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

8. Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

9. Francis X. Clooney, “Reading the Book of Mormon: Part I,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, September 14, 2012, <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/reading-book-mormon-part-i> (accessed May 20, 2013.)

10. Radhanath Swami, “Columbia University—Discussion with Francis X. Clooney,” April 24, 2012, <http://www.radhanathswami.com/2012/04/columbia-university-discussion-with-francis-x-clooney/> (accessed May 20, 2013.)

11. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 146.

12. Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, “Mormonism: An Eastern Religion?” *Sunstone* no. 153 (February 2009): 12–19.

13. Grant Wacker, “Understanding the Past, Using the Past: Reflections on Two Approaches to History,” in *Religious Advocacy and American History*, edited by Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 177.

14. This phrase comes from a letter, the original of which may be found in Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Joseph Smith Letter-book 1, p. 4, Church History Library, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

15. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.

16. Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 50.



RESPONSE

John-Charles Duffy

In the field of religious studies, comparison is a long-established method that has in recent decades suffered a backlash. The term “comparative religion” used to be commonly employed in the U.S. and Europe to describe the field that on this panel we’ve been calling “religious studies.” I teach in a department that is still called the “Department of Comparative Religion,” a name that makes me squirm a little because it strikes my ear as passé—as if I were teaching in a department of “philology” or “Oriental studies.” The problem with all those terms is that they conjure up older conceptions of what those fields were about. “Comparative religion” is an intellectual endeavor that Westerners have pursued in the past for various partisan reasons—like showing why Christianity is superior to other religions; or identifying commonalities between Christianity and other religions that could offer a point of entrance for Christian missionaries; or advancing a liberal, pluralistic kind of theology that postulates an underlying unity beneath different religions or some transcendent reality toward which different religions are pointing. Today, those agendas are seen by many in religious studies as ideologically problematic, or lacking academic rigor, or insufficiently distanced from the agendas of religious insiders. The postmodern turn in the academy has made many contemporary scholars wary of comparisons that seem to postulate universality or to efface difference.

Nevertheless, despite these qualms that have come to surround the activity of “comparison,” it appears to me that religious studies scholars still accept as common sense the notion that setting one thing alongside another thing can be a useful way to gain new perspective. And that is what our panelists today have done—I would argue, to intriguing effect. By setting certain Mormon phenomena alongside certain phenomena from Asian religions—or rather, *non-Mormon* Asian religions, taking a cue from Melissa Inouye—the panelists open up interesting new avenues of inquiry. I would like to use my response to press the panelists either to walk us a little farther down those avenues or to articulate more explicitly the agendas they are pursuing with these particular comparisons.

Howlett looks at the way that Hindu devotees have selectively appropriated Western-style academic scholarship in support of devotional claims; he compares this to “faithful history” in Mormonism. He also holds up Francis Clooney’s work in Catholic-Hindu comparative theology as a possible model for how Mormons might gain “fresh theological insights” into their own tradition by engaging with another tradition.

Howlett’s remarks raise two questions for me. First, he suggests that the comparison between Mormon faithful history and Hindu devotional history can help us learn something about both faithful history and devotional history. He did not, however, elaborate what that “something” we could learn might be. Like a golden contact, I would like to know more. Second, Howlett acknowledges that Clooney’s comparative theology could be problematic for Mormons: basically, Howlett perceives the possibility for tension between the claim that Mormonism is the one true church and comparative theology’s devotion to learning from the religious Other. Does this mean that Howlett has a partisan theological agenda in promoting comparative theology as a method for the study of Mormonism? That is, does Howlett promote comparative theology because he wants to pull against the kind of conservative Mormon theologies that emphasize the “one true church” claim, in favor of more liberal, pluralistic versions of Mormonism? It seems to me that Howlett has given us, perhaps inadvertently, a glimpse of his hand; I

would urge him to lay his cards on the table in the interest of clarifying the politics of comparison. Exactly what interests are served or what agendas are advanced—in this case, perhaps, a theological agenda—by the particular act of comparison that Howlett has performed?

Michael Ing suggests that studying others' teachings and practices helps us reexamine our own personal or communal questions of meaning. As an example, he shows how studying Confucian mourning practices opens up questions like: "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?" Like Howlett, Ing champions comparative theology, which he envisions could let Mormons use "Confucian theories of ritual [to] inform a Mormon culture of mourning." Or we could see how "Mormon conceptions of death might speak to Confucian concerns of loss."

Again, as with Howlett, I find myself with two questions for Ing—two subjects about which I would like to know more. First: the examples he offers of questions generated by comparison tend toward the existential and tend to strike me as questions that would certainly be of interest to people *inside* particular religious communities—e.g., Mormonism or Confucianism—but not so clearly of interest to scholars working from what in religious studies we call the "outsider's perspective." How relevant will the kind of comparison in which Ing is interested prove to scholars *outside* these religious communities? If the answer is, "Maybe not so much," then comparison could, ironically, reinforce ghettoizing tendencies in Mormon Studies. Second: Ing anticipates that through comparison, scholars of Mormonism can persuade "those in scholarly and popular circles [to] take the study of Mormonism more seriously." Concern for being taken "more seriously" is a frequent refrain in Mormon Studies. I would like to ask Ing: For you specifically, what is the chip on your shoulder? What has happened or not happened that makes you feel not taken seriously? I ask not because I think it's wrong to have a chip on your shoulder, but because I would like to know if the chip on your shoulder is the same chip on my shoulder. If it is, I will likely be sympathetic

to the comparisons you want to pursue; if it is not the same, you might be pursuing an agenda I am not willing to sign onto. As in my response to Howlett, I am fishing for clarification about the specific politics of comparison.

My response to Inouye is directed not only to her remarks today, but also to other work of hers that I've had the opportunity to read. Inouye's study of Chinese Pentecostals has inspired her to ask what I find particularly attractive questions about globalized Mormonism: Where is Mormonism's "charismatic center"? Have scholars of Mormonism been too quick to assume the effectiveness of correlation, and have we thus failed to recognize diverse Mormon expressions? How have Mormon attitudes toward the supernatural developed historically? Also, if I understand her correctly, Inouye sees comparison as a way to establish that Mormonism isn't as weird or heterodox as some might think, i.e., because it has precedents or analogues elsewhere.

While I am intrigued by what all three panelists have offered today, I am especially excited to see how Inouye may develop her work in the future. Questions she has raised—such as, "Where is Mormonism's charismatic center?"—are tantalizing as ways to rethink our understanding of Mormonism as a globalized movement, a movement that is not just imported to new contexts but transformed by them in ways that may not have been foreseen from the movement's American center. Also, Inouye poses her own version of a question I found myself wondering about as I responded to Ing: What does the study of Mormonism offer scholars who are not specifically interested in Mormonism? "Why should someone outside of North America be interested in studying Mormons?" Inouye has written. "Beyond being a cultural mirror to American history or an American general election or two, what does Mormonism have to offer scholars?" I would like to know how Inouye answers that question, and I would like to press her to be specific in identifying scholarly discourse communities which she thinks ought to be interested in Mormons and why. Should scholars of global Pentecostalism, for example, be interested in Mormons as a comparative case—and if so, why? If comparative work around Mormonism

is going to produce fruitful *conversations* with practitioners of other scholarly specializations, then those of us who are interested in Mormonism need to be asking not just, “How do Hindu cases, or Confucian cases, or Pentecostal cases, help us better understand Mormonism?” We also need to be asking, “How do Mormon cases help us—and our colleagues with other specializations—better understand other religious phenomena?”