

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?”